Draco Malfoy and the Talon Brand

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by starbrigid

Summary

A man is dead at Draco Malfoy's hands, and the consequences will reverberate for Sirius, for Harry, for the wizarding world entire, and, most of all, for Voldemort. It is not so easy, though, to forsake his parents and his old friends in Slytherin, as he is forced to choose what he will become and who he will leave behind. The only certainty left to Draco is his own power, which is becoming stronger and stranger and more and more dangerous.

Almost as dangerous as how much he loves Harry Potter.

Notes

Hey, everyone! -waves- Welcome to fifth year! Thanks so much for all your thoughts and comments on the previous installments! I'm so excited for all the plans for this year! ^^

Anyway, standard remark that I mean no character bashing for anyone, though Draco has his strong feelings and issues towards certain people. Heavier warnings overall for this installment, which will be more mature and dark. This will include the infamous OOTP teen angst CAPS LOCK HARRY, heavy violence and gore, prejudice, PTSD/anxiety/depression with very poor self esteem and all that comes with it, extreme moral ambiguity/moral failure, unreliable/deficient narration, dom/sub and kink undertones, sex acts, and Bellatrix Lestrange. She gets her own warning.

There is a playlist for this fic which will update with every chapter here.

Anyway, enjoy! <3

- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: 德拉科马尔福与鹰爪标记 by Asuka041942

The Antipodean Opaleye

Once again, Sirius had wiped the floor with him, and knowing what Draco knew about the year to come, he could only take that as a very good sign.

They left their so-called dueling room, which Remus called the Fire Safety Hazard Room, and Draco tromped straight down to the cauldrons, which were tucked away where Kreacher had used to keep the linens. No one knew where Kreacher kept them or almost anything now. They just considered themselves lucky that Kreacher kept cooking and cleaning for them, and hadn't yet tried to burn 12 Grimmauld Place to the ground with all of them inside it.

"You'll get him one of these days," Remus said, smiling as he read the story of the duel from Draco's filthy, soot-covered state. Remus was crouched over checking on the Wolfsbane, and smiled wider when Draco dropped himself exhausted on the ground beside him, to check on the angel's infusion. With Severus having dropped off the map the past few weeks, Draco was responsible for brewing it for himself. "It should be ready, it's the right color, isn't it? Go on, wash off-"

"Wash off the stench of failure?" Sirius finished, lounging in the doorway smug and unblemished as a conquering hero. "Yes, you should do that, Draco, I could smell it from upstairs. It's either that, or just your sweat. I gave him a real work-out, you know, Remus. Toyed with him before I delivered the killing blow."

"Yes, you have once again managed to beat up our fifteen-year-old ward, I'm *so* impressed," Remus deadpanned, only to laugh louder when Sirius came up behind him, hugging him and pulling him back and forth. "Not over the Wolfsbane, you savage, that's important!"

"*I'm* important..." Sirius whined, in that childish tone he often resorted to for Remus's attention. Draco got himself a large bottle of the infusion before smirking over at his uncle.

"You only keep winning," Draco said with a haughty sniff, "Because I'm not allowed to use dark magic. The first time that restriction gets relaxed, I wipe the floor with you-"

"Draco," Remus reminded him for the fiftieth time, "You know we're trying to wane you *off* the dark magic, sweetheart," and Draco made his most innocent, helpless face at him.

"I know, Remus," he said, letting his voice tremble, "It's just that Uncle Sirius is so *strong*, I get *scared*," and when Remus turned to Sirius in outrage, pushing Sirius off to glare at him accusingly, that was Draco's cue to stroll out nonchalantly. Sirius glared at him over Remus's shoulder, and Draco winked at him before closing the door.

Before taking his bath, he took a Polaroid down off the wall to sit with him. He had his long angel's infusion then, with the one picture of Harry Potter with him, to sit beside him on the rim of the tub. In it, Harry was still and unmoving and confident, in his Triwizard champion robes with Draco a nervous wreck fussing over him to the side. Hermione had taken it before the First Task, and if Draco folded over the half with him on it, that was the beauty of Muggle

photos. He could erase himself, without fear his image would just cross over to the other side to get nearer to Harry again.

He had spelled it impervious to water, but he still took care as he placed it back where he had found it on his wall of pictures, which in retrospect, it was very lucky he liberated from the Manor when he had. The Arsenal striker Ian Wright hung in place of pride, eternally frozen in the leap to score a header. Draco could hardly imagine he would have fared so well if left behind at Malfoy Manor.

Wright and the other photographs now adorned the gleaming silver-blue walls of what had been Sirius's room growing up, completely revamped by Remus in exchange for Draco making him the Wolfsbane. It had taken some doing for an exasperated Remus to get down the pictures, including bikini pictures of Muggle girls that had made him especially snappy with Sirius each time he had to take a crack at them. But eventually, Remus had managed with his steady patience, which tended to eventually triumph at most everything, and gotten the walls clean to paint Draco's chosen color. Sirius had pronounced himself relieved to see the slate of his childhood bedroom wiped clean.

Remus had knocked down a wall and found an old en-suite bathroom, which Sirius had been shocked to find, and rather bitter he had never gotten to use when it was his room. Remus had revamped that as well, and in the room itself, the chandelier had been removed, a navy blue carpet laid, another blue Persian rug over it in Antipodean Opaleye designs. Now the entire room could not be more like Draco, with the nameplate outside reading Frankenstein. Draco was excited to show it to Ron and Hermione when they arrived along with the rest of the Order. Enough people would be soon be coming, for Draco to fear it would grow more cramped than the Burrow. But he didn't begrudge it if he could have his friends with him.

Remus had said he would move another bed to Draco's spacious room to share it if he wanted, though there would be enough rooms anyway. Draco lost interest in the idea, though, when he found out they wouldn't let him have Hermione up there. No matter how many times he tried to argue that he was gay, Remus remained adamant that she shouldn't have to share a room with a boy for her sake. So both she and Ron would be getting their own rooms downstairs.

Draco had imagined Luna joining Hermione and Harry joining Ron, but both of those things seemed unlikely to happen, between Luna's protective father, and Dumbledore's insistence Harry stay with the monstrous Dursleys. However much, from the sound of it, Harry spent the majority of his conversations on the two-way mirror with Sirius complaining about it.

Sirius had admitted to Draco privately that he and Remus feared, even if his trial next month did go as planned, Dumbledore would still not allow Sirius to formally adopt the boy and make this his permanent home. And thinking of that, Draco had to fight off the miserable mix of longing and regret and relief it sent through him, that Harry was unlikely to appear at Grimmauld anytime soon.

"Harry is going to be so bitter he didn't get to see this," was Ron's first comment the next week as he surveyed Draco's room upon arrival, watching fondly as Ginny went through the line of hanging dragon necklaces and tried to identify each in turn. She seemed to think

Astaroth one of the prettiest. The sight of him did always make Draco think of Theo. "You really have gotten yourself a sweet set-up here, mate."

Ginny seemed even more fascinated by his wall of photos, the ones that contained Harry the most so. Ron had claimed Ginny was over her crush on Harry, but Draco ended up doubting it whenever he spent any time with her. He told himself, as he did each time, that his determination to hold Harry at arm's length would bear fruit soon, and Harry would transfer his mistaken affections to Girl Weasley. All he had to do was wait, for an outcome he told himself he desired.

"I rather have, haven't I?" Draco preened, giving Ginny permission with an indulgent wave to try on one of the other necklaces, a black one that shimmered in the bluebell flames he had hovering along every corner. "Sorry you never got the chance to see Malfoy Manor like Hermione did, but I figure you're just as happy with both of your eyeballs still attached to their sockets, so..."

Ron made a shuddering noise. "Urgh, Draco, don't talk about my eyeballs. When you do, I get the feeling you're imagining how they would taste."

Draco laughed, and mimed tugging out Ron's eyeballs, pulling them to his mouth, and happily slurping them up like escargot.

Ginny was examining herself in Draco's wall-high blue mirror. He had floated it up from storage for himself, after an exhaustive array of magical tests that had determined it was indeed just a mirror. "Hey, Draco, this is the Hungarian Horntail, right? Why is one of the wings broken off?"

"Oh, I wore that the night of the Third Task," Draco said absently, "So I don't remember exactly, but it must have broken at some point in the graveyard," only to wilt under their stricken stares. "What? You asked. Should I have thrown the thing out? Performed an exorcism? The set's not complete without it." He had the feeling the dragons and their chain would be the last presents he got from Mother for a while, if ever. "Its wing is ugly, yeah, but I'm getting around to fixing it."

"Too busy?" Ron said skeptically, eyeing Draco's tall bookcase full of questionable titles, before Draco took on a dueling stance and mimed struggling to keep up a shielding charm. Both he and Ginny laughed, while Ginny toyed nervously with the charm, thumb rubbing over the break where its black wing had been. "Oh, right, your dueling. You really have a practice duel every night?"

"Almost every night," Draco said reluctantly, "Remus is trying to get us to cut down, at least to only every other night, and now with way more people here he'll probably be too busy," and Ginny looked suddenly fascinated.

"I'd like to learn how to duel," she blurted, before covering her mouth, looking mortified.

"Get in line," said Ron, and summarily ejected his little sister. Immediately, Draco and Ron began to gossip like a pair of old fishwives, fighting to spill out everything they had missed in mere weeks apart quickly enough.

It was a great deal, it turned out, mainly because Sirius had left updating the Weasleys about his trial to Draco. Sirius didn't like to speak of it more than necessary. Though he pronounced himself confident in the verdict, and fine whatever the result, the tension was more palpable with every day closer it got. Ron would likely to have to testify, as would everyone who had been there the night in third-year where they had caught and then lost Pettigrew again. "You think when they talk about Wormtail, they won't have to mention your, you know, um, part in..."

"His murder?" Draco finished, and Ron made a face, not of squeamishness but sympathy. He had been avoiding the word out of consideration for Draco, not himself. "Lucky there's a bloodthirsty Dark Lord on the loose, not that the Ministry wants to acknowledge it. I reckon it'll get to the point where we can do just about *anything*, and get away with blaming it on the Dark Lord..."

"You know," Ron said equably, and let Draco toss a pretzel in his mouth from across the room, "Someone who didn't know you very well might find that train of thought disturbing."

"Oh, I'm not trying to *disturb* you," Draco purred. "I'll leave that for when you sit in on our duel. Still up for it, Cannon? The last thing you ever see could be dragonfire..."

"Alright, one," Ron said, "I've been looking forward to watching you and Padfoot duel all summer, you can't scare me off. And two, Frankenstein, sorry, but just because you like to call yourself a dragon and you can throw fireballs, it doesn't mean what you make is actually *dragonfire.*"

"If I win tomorrow," Draco whined, pouting, "You have to let me call it dragonfire."

Draco lost the duel the next day, of course, as he invariably lost every duel against Sirius. Although it was hideous having to worry about Severus and harm coming to him from his spying, it was a relief not being in contact, to the extent it meant Draco hadn't had to admit how frequently he was succumbing to Severus's childhood nemesis.

A side effect of practicing so frequently was that Sirius was getting better-honed along with Draco. That was good, given what Draco feared could happen again this year, but bad when it came to not looking dumb, in front of a gathering of not one but five Weasleys, who ended up sneaking in to observe. Fred and George brought snacks, calling it the evening's entertainment, while Ginny brought in a parchment and quill to take notes. Draco's Ventus duo blew that out of her hands even from behind protective glass.

To Draco's credit, the duel went on nearly twenty minutes by Bill's reckoning, before Sirius invariably stunned him and put him out of commission. Normally Draco didn't last half that long. Sirius looked more bedraggled and exhausted than usual, as he limped back out towards a waiting judgmental Remus. "He's just all pumped up to impress your lot," Sirius told the Weasleys. "Normally, I have him on the floor in seconds."

Draco smirked, waving his wand lazily in the air, and called, "Cauterizo!" Sirius yelped as the brand on his left hand ignited anew, before Draco cast a quick Finite incantatem. "Or," Draco drawled, "I could have just done *that*, and then who would have been on the floor?"

Nothing would do after that but for every single Weasley there, parents included, to be shown the talon brand on Sirius's hand, and what weeks of experimentation had shown Draco he could do with it. Mr. Weasley in particular looked uncomfortable when he found out that Draco could reactivate the burning of the brand, although when he heard Lucius Malfoy was on the list of those thus marked, his expression grew more speculative.

"It's dark magic, though," Remus said with a sigh, "Which means Draco is not going to practice it, right, Draco?"

"I have never done dark magic in my life," Draco deadpanned, "And I resent the implication I have."

Ron snorted so hard he nearly inhaled his tea.

"Lucky he's not my enemy," Sirius told Mr. Weasley, "Or I'd be in real trouble, wouldn't I?"

"Oh, yeah," Ron called, "And Draco's not exactly the forgiving kind."

"Excuse you!" Draco exclaimed in outrage. "How many things have I forgiven you, Ronald? Starting with how you spent an entire year thinking I was the Heir of Slytherin..."

Bill snorted, glancing between Draco and Sirius's still-smoking hand. "Yeah, don't know how anyone could have gotten that idea..."

Sirius had heard this story, but not in detail, and all Draco had done was pique his curiosity. He, Remus, Ron, and Draco ended up sitting up together by the fire until late in the night, trading stories of the year before Sirius's breakout. Remus's wanderings were something Draco had never heard about, nor Dumbledore's eventual recruitment of him to the Defense position. Nor had he heard about Sirius's time in Azkaban in quite this detail, and that part set his teeth chattering. There were memories of his own in Azkaban he couldn't share, and he just had to smile and nod as Sirius ended his story, as always, with the solemn wish that Draco and his friends would never even have to see the place, let alone reside in it.

"With Draco, it's worth impressing the risk upon him," Remus remarked, more prescient than he knew. Draco yelped and pretended at offense for a while, making them all laugh as they headed up for bed.

Hermione arrived the following week, and though the Order had determined it too dangerous for them to go out to any Muggle sporting events together, it was easy for them to rig up a Muggle television to get cable inside Grimmauld, in preparation for the English football league resuming in August. Draco heard they had caused Kreacher no small degree of lamentations with this profaning of the sacred ancient Black premises, but Draco didn't have to hear about it. He still hadn't had a real conversation with Kreacher. Maybe that had something to do with what Draco had done to the portrait of Kreacher's beloved Walburga, Sirius's mother, who rested in the tatters that Sectumsempra had left her still, behind a black velvet curtain. Kreacher could think as he liked, and Mr. Weasley's enthusiasm for the Muggle telly-vision was such to drown out any and all complaints.

The only ill effect of the telly was drawing the attention of Nymphadora Tonks as well, whose father was a Muggleborn. She was often about, as a member of the Order and one of the many on rotation guarding Harry. But Draco avoided her as much as possible, confining himself to polite distantness, in the face of her careless bits of friendliness. Let her think him a normal snobbish Malfoy, spurning his slightly more disgraced kin. As far as he had been told, neither she nor any of the Order save Sirius, Remus, and Severus had connected Draco to the mysterious hooded figure that had fought against the Aurors using Dark Magic outside Grimmauld. Draco wanted to keep it that way, joint television watching notwithstanding.

"You really should consider taking the Muggle Studies OWL," Hermione kept telling him. She had already decided to put it on her timetable. "Without the class. You're already doing that for Divination, aren't you? And you've come leaps and bounds since you were too scared to cross a London street. I don't think you'd have to study that much to score well, really."

"Eleven OWLs, Hermione, are you mad?" Ron gaped, but Bill behind them got this modest, secretive smile. Ron whirled his head reflexively to look at him, and then scowled. "Oh, yeah, Bill and Percy both got all twelve OWLs, so I guess you could, theoretically... but you'll have Quidditch back this year, Draco, and you've never taken Care of Magical Creatures either..."

That Ron knew of. That was hardly the stumbling point against the idea of that perfect platonic ideal, that pipe dream of OWLs in all twelve subjects. "I'm waiting to consult with Severus about my OWL plans. Except I *know* Muggle Studies is off the table. If I take an OWL in Muggle Studies," Draco said, "Let alone... *score well on it...*" he shuddered theatrically, "I *will* be disowned, there's no two ways about it."

Hermione stared at him silently, gaze almost asking whether he didn't expect that to happen soon anyway. Draco ignored it. He had achieved nine OWLs his first time around, with three Es, in Care of Magical Creatures, Herbology, and History of Magic, and six Os, in Potions, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Charms, Transfiguration, Divination, and Astronomy. Those numbers would be more than good enough this time around. No need to upset the hornet's nest with Muggle Studies. Not when just the subject's name made his mind flash the fate of the subject's professor.

To distract Hermione, he took her and Ron to the Black family tapestry, which Ron had only ever seen in picture form, and Hermione had only seen before Draco blasted Aunt Bella's name off it. Hermione seemed fascinated by that large, angry black scorch mark in place of a name, tracing it with her fingers, while Ron was more interested in finding the blasted name who had been expelled from the family for the temerity of wedding a Weasley.

"Harry is going to be so jealous," Ron said, with a contented sigh at how cool he clearly found all of this. Hermione looked between the three of them with a pall coming over her face.

"Have you been reading his letters?" she sighed. "He is *already*. The way we've been forbidden to tell him anything... it's driving him insane. I've been worried about how he's coping in the aftermath of the incident at the graveyard, and when he finds out *we* spent the summer together without him, while he was just trapped with that awful aunt and uncle of his..."

"I don't know if Sirius has told him you lot have been here. I would have written him more specifics," Draco sighed. "Even if we *were* forbidden, but Remus makes me give him all my letters for Harry, to read over before he sends them for me, so..."

"Wow," Ron said, wrinkling his nose. "You have to write yours for Professor Lupin to read? They must be the most boring letters ever."

"Yes, he'll be the maddest at me," Draco said tightly, gesturing at the Black tapestry and then more widely at the house around them. He didn't gesture at Ron and Hermione, but he knew their companionship would have to be honestly included in that scope as well. "Because this has been mine, and it should have been his." The idea of him getting to talk to Harry through the mirror himself had been a non-starter with Sirius and Remus. Draco had the suspicion Dumbledore had instructed them to keep Harry in the dark.

"We'll have to send him something very nice for his birthday," Hermione said primly. She insisted that food was the best bet, given the way the Dursleys starved him. Draco agreed to go in on them sending a great load of Honeydukes chocolates. Though he wondered if Harry wouldn't just feel more insulted than gratified on his birthday, at this early proof that he had spent the day alone, while his best friends spent it together without him.

Harry was on Draco's mind all too often, with Ron and Hermione's presence not helping. Often, it was only in dueling practice with Sirius that Draco could go for a solid half hour without thinking of him. He was on Draco's mind at night, in bed, dreaming and waking.

He was on Draco's mind when Hermione got on Remus's back and managed to make him agree to teach them the Patronus charm. Ron and Hermione were surprised at Draco's quick refusal of the offer to join. He could tell that Harry hadn't told them anything about the brief lessons he and Draco had shared with Remus. He clearly hadn't told them of Draco's failure with it, as Ron wandered off to the dueling room wondering to Hermione if Draco didn't want to go practice it because it was too easy for him already.

The thought of Harry's considerateness, and the form Harry's Patronus took, made Draco go back to his own room and get out the fourth notebook. It had been put away, replaced in Draco's constant company by the fifth, but he rifled through the fourth to find what he had written down of Trelawney's prophecy from the blood ritual. *The dragon will love the stag, and the stag will bleed. When the dragon loves the stag, it will be the stag's doom.*

Draco did love Harry. He had tried not to, but almost since he met him, back in the blue loop, it felt like he had. Or at least his waking and sleeping moments both had all been dominated by the awareness that Harry Potter existed in the world. It was a problem he had to try and solve and had not yet to this day managed, like he could not simply carry on being Draco Malfoy unless something was done about Potter. What that something was, he couldn't say. Perhaps the prophecy had some kind of insight for him.

He had trained himself not to show emotion when Harry was discussed, not with Sirius and Remus, nor with Ron and Hermione. But the news Harry had been attacked made Draco scream. No one else did, not even little Ginny. Despite the gravity of the news, Draco's shriek

meant the Weasley twins were smirking mightily by the time Draco could clamp a hand over his mouth.

"Dementors," Draco tried to explain, "It's that they said it was Dementors," and Remus looked over at him gravely with those steady hazel eyes that meant he would be patient, but that Draco would be getting a lecture at the next chance.

Not now, though. Remus had told Harry as soon as he reached them on the mirror not to hand over his wand, and not to leave the house, but Draco had half a mind to Apparate over there himself. He might have, if he wasn't certain that a lecture would then be upgraded to a full-scale nuclear meltdown.

The lecture came the next day, after some of the dust had settled and Dumbledore had stepped in with the Ministry. Apparently, they'd been set to destroy Harry's wand, like some over-ambitious splinter cell of Death Eaters. The hearing was set for the twelfth, but the Order seemed to have decided for Harry to stay put where he was for whatever reason. By then, letters had already come to Grimmauld from Hedwig, for him, Ron, and Hermione separately, all in the same hasty, angry scrawl: "I don't know if Sirius and Remus told you. I've just been attacked by Dementors and I might be expelled from Hogwarts. They won't tell me what's going on or when I'm going to get out of here. Do you know?"

Just the sound of that made Draco fear for Harry's mental state. It made Draco feel as if Harry might do something drastic if not given reassurance. But on Dumbledore's orders, after an appearance he made just briefly sweeping through, Sirius and Remus had taken Hedwig, caged her, and kept her from pecking them for replies or even flying back to Harry. They forbade Draco from writing back, which Draco of course intended to ignore. But Remus found Draco in his room before he could finish even a quick note back. "Draco," he said mildly, "You did hear us saying to leave the communication with Harry to us?"

"I don't care what Dumbledore says. It's so dumb to leave him in the dark. He's been attacked by *Dementors*, Remus," Draco said through gritted teeth, staring down at his hands and trying to keep his breathing level. The past year or two with Severus's regular supply of various potion and herbal remedies for his anxiety had helped prevent many respiratory fits, but the sound of Harry at the mercy of those creatures had it spiking like it hadn't since the graveyard. "Dementors! And maybe those don't affect you or anyone else the way they do me and Harry, but-"

"This should be an isolated incident," Remus said grimly. "The Dementors are still faithfully guarding Azkaban. You must have heard Sirius's suspicion that they were sent not by Voldemort but by the Ministry, in an attempt to draw this very response from Harry. He is known to be proficient in the Patronus charm- I've heard you may have written a song on the subject." That gentle barb didn't even draw a smile from Draco. "And with this hearing, they would have gotten what they wanted, though immediate expulsion would have been more ideal. It has become too public, if it was them, for them to try again..."

"He's going to feel abandoned, you know," Draco said heavily, and Remus shook his head.

"Not for long. We'll bring him here once we can make a plan to get past those Muggles-"

"Hey," Draco said, "Great news," and drew his wand. "I just came up with a plan to get the Muggles out of the way. What can I say, I'm a genius. Come on, let's go-"

"Draco," Remus said, giving him a severe look. "This is exactly what I mean, about your lack of discipline as a hindrance to someday becoming an effective member of the Order." One of Remus's pet subjects, to be sure. "Which is hardly your fault. Little as you might like that to hear it, Severus and Sirius have both been too indulgent with you. And Sirius, I fear, is a rather poor role model, when it comes to acting impulsively and unilaterally. With things of real importance like this, it is best to try and be patient, and look to the judgment of those who can see further ahead than we can. Like Albus Dumbledore. He will not let any harm befall Harry, I assure you-"

"I'm not worried about harm," Draco said in a small voice, "I'm just worried about *him*," and Remus touched the back of Draco's hand, gently prodding him to pocket it again, before putting an arm around his shoulders.

"You will see him soon enough, Draco," Remus sighed. "In the meantime, *we* have something to talk about. I notice you haven't been attending the lessons I've been giving your friends with the Patronus charm." Draco opened his mouth to protest there was no point, but Remus foresaw the objection. "I know you had little success in third year, but those lessons were cut unfortunately short." Oh, yes. Not at all because Draco had been mistaken for a murderous fugitive in the middle of the night and banned from Gryffindor Tower for life. "And you will be a fifth-year now. Your magic has matured, and so have you." He squinted. "Theoretically."

Draco protested laughingly, and then more seriously at the idea of trying at making a Patronus again. But two days after Harry was attacked, he ended up stood there alone in the empty wooden dueling room with Remus anyway.

"It has been a year and half now," Remus began seriously, "Since our lessons ended, really before they began. I have given it a great deal of thought, Draco, why you were so incapable of the charm, to the point of never even producing sparks." Draco had already heard mortifying tales of Hermione's otter and Ron's terrier Patronuses chasing each other about Grimmauld, though he had made sure to be high up in his room reading whenever that was likely to happen. "I have read a number of books involving the nature of the charm and of Dementors, as well as more books on magical theory..."

"I've probably read some of those books too," Draco said bitterly, remembering the corpse of Maledictum laid out in the dirt of Hogsmeade. "It doesn't change the fact that my wand and my magic, and *me*, they're all too dark to produce a Patronus." He tried to get up the resolution to tell what he and Theo had learned about the wand's core, and lost it. He still suspected it was really his aunt's fault. Either way... "You're wasting your time. It's a glaring weakness, yes, especially if the Dementors weren't just sent by the Ministry, or they go over to the Dark Lord like Harry and I heard in the graveyard... but there's no help for it. My magic is too evil-"

"I'm not entirely sure if it has to do with your wand, Draco," Remus said thoughtfully. "May I?" Draco gave him his wand very cautiously, letting Remus touch it with a single fingertip first to make sure it wouldn't scald him. But not only did the wand contentedly let Remus take it, as if tuned to Draco's loyalties, it did one better.

"Expecto patronum!" Remus cast with the talon wand. Draco's stomach dropped at once with a feeling of gutter-low self-loathing, at the sight of that wand in another's hand producing a perfect brilliant silver wolf.

Funny that the talon wand hadn't worked for Grindelwald, but it had for Remus of all people. And so well. Maybe it hadn't been properly activated yet, when Grindelwald tried, or maybe it was blood, and Remus was tied enough to Sirius already to count as a member of House Black... but that wasn't what mattered...

What mattered was that the wand wasn't the problem. Draco was.

"So it's me," Draco said in a small voice, and Remus shook his head again, waving his own wand to let his Patronus dissipate before handing Draco's wand back.

"Draco," Remus said cautiously, "I don't know how to put this in a way that won't offend you. Maybe we should have talked about this sooner, since I am one of your guardians for the summer, and I take that responsibility seriously. Draco, what do you think about happiness?"

Draco squinted at him. "You mean you don't think I'm using a happy enough memory? Harry said he had trouble with that at first, at finding a strong enough memory to use..."

"Not exactly," Remus said, and conjured them up some cushions to sit down on. Draco conjured them some larger ones and blankets, and leaned against the raw wooden wall, pulling his knees up to his chest under the blanket as he listened.

"That is *one* way to think about the mental act of the Patronus charm. The Dementor is a creature that acts by drawing out all of your happiness and warmth, replacing them with the feeling of bleakness and hopelessness. So the Patronus charm draws upon the memories a person has of times in which they experienced the most of that warm feeling in the past, uses the raw magic within a person's core to press out that warmth as a protective light, and takes the shape of the animal that best expresses the person's character, as their selfhood is asserted against the erasure of the Dementor's cold. So there can be difficulty with usually a few basic ways.

"A wizard can fail to understand the charm. He can be too young or too magically weak to produce the needed force for the enchantment. Clearly, neither of those are your issue. He can be failing to use a strong enough memory of happiness. Often, this can be solved by imagining a memory rather than drawing on a past one. But in your case, I wonder if the issue is not the memory but your relationship to happiness itself... tell me, Draco, do you feel you *deserve* happiness?"

"What?" Draco breathed, truly taken aback, and Remus smiled sadly.

"I know it's an odd question, Draco, but think about this and try and answer honestly. When something good happens to you, is there ever a voice in your head that tells you that you don't deserve the happiness you're experiencing? Do the people who make you happy *just* make you happy, or does it frighten you, with the fear that the warmth they represent will not remain in your life for long? When you are faced with a Dementor, do you feel a *likeness* to them?"

"You mean," Draco said with a deep breath, "That I'm not capable of real- of *untainted* happiness," and Remus shook his head again, reaching out and taking Draco's hand with his care-worn, roughly lined palm. It was so much more a peasant's hand than Father's, and yet it radiated comfort in a way that Draco had never experienced at Malfoy Manor, not even with Mother.

"Not exactly, Draco," Remus sighed. "I might not be explaining this very well. What I'm trying to say, Draco, is that you... you're a person with a lot of walls up. A lot of defenses. And believe me... I don't really know you, Draco, much as I'd like to, but from what I know, I can tell the life you've led, even at such a young age, has made those walls very necessary. And you are very, very good at putting up a front like you don't care what anyone thinks about you, like you can't be hurt, like you're invincible. In part because you're such an introspective, thoughtful person, and in part because you are so skilled and powerful at magic. But Draco... the *composition* of those walls, even the strength of them, does nothing to alter the nature of what rests behind them."

Draco's breath was steady, but he felt a prickling behind his eyes that he had to fight away. "Are you saying I'm too fucked up to produce a Patronus? That you can't make one if you hate yourself too much?"

"I'm saying," Remus said gently, squeezing his hand harder, "That real happiness is something experienced by *you*, Draco. Not at a remove from yourself, watching from the outside. Not from behind a wall. And in order to produce a Patronus, which is an expression of your truest self, you need to be able to conceptualize a vision in your head, of a world where the beautiful, happy things you imagine belong to you, rather than being stolen or conned from the world." He looked down at Draco's palm, and Draco could tell they were both remembering the brand of THIEF that had been written across it for half a year, before Remus had removed it from him.

Draco couldn't help but let out a choking, dry sob, even as he was biting his tongue to try and hold himself together. "You're saying I have to stop feeling like an imposter when I'm happy? Then that's impossible, Remus. Because everything I have, everything I am- it's *all* stolen. I don't deserve to have a Patronus-"

Remus pulled him into a hug, then, telling him he was wrong, to try not to think such things about himself, that he was a good person. Draco had learned to tune him out at this by now, but at least he could lean into Remus's shoulder, and enjoy the feeling of being held in response for a failure, instead of *struck*.

It stuck in Draco's mind, though, over the next few days, in which Remus was kind enough not to press the issue of real Patronus lessons. It stuck in Draco's mind as the Order finally assembled with the mission to remove Harry from the Dursleys, with Mad-Eye Moody's foreboding presence in their mist not enough to keep Draco from hanging around trying to demand to come. The eight volunteers they had, Remus said, were more than enough, but Draco only desisted once Sirius reminded him, none too quietly, of his inability to produce a Patronus, should they run into more Dementors after Harry on their way out.

Draco stomped back up the stairs and began to cast spells to try and vent his frustration. He didn't want to demolish any dummies or do anything else to mess up his room, though, so he

ended up playing with fireballs idly between his hands, pulling threads of the deepening blue out like pieces of candy floss and remembering despairingly the feeling of Protego Diabolica surging out from his wand in the Room of Requirement. Now that had been happiness, up until Harry had to be suicidally stupid and march himself through the flame.

At least after the graveyard, he didn't think Harry would be quite as inclined towards that particular bit of foolishness.

It was triply nerve-wracking, between his annoyance at his own uselessness, his irrational fear something could befall Harry in his quick protected trip, and the awareness of that ugliness that waited patiently to rear its head again between them the moment they reunited. He didn't want to face Harry, and a part of him had been selfishly relieved that Sirius hadn't given his godson the new home he promised this summer. He didn't know how to act around Harry, after Harry had stood there in front of him as the sun rose over the great lake and told him, *I'm sorry I'm in love with you.*

But it was one thing to be too tainted a person to deserve Harry Potter, and another thing to be so tainted he didn't even deserve a Patronus. Or at least it should be. What was he supposed to do, just wait around until he somehow became self-actualized enough to *understand happiness* or some bullshit like that? He stood up, tried telling himself *I deserve happiness*, and remembered Harry's lips and the words he had spoken that morning. "You're a good person," he whispered along with the Harry in his mind. "Expecto patronum!"

No more response than if the incantation had been, say, *Dragon Malfoyius*, but it *had* been an awful choice of memory, if he was going for untainted happiness. He began to circle through a Rolodex of less tainted-seeming memories, like a handful of Polaroids off his wall.

Severus giving me the charm he carved for Hermione's birthday.

Watching Luna defeat the Boggart of Tom Riddle.

Winning the House Cup for Slytherin in first year.

Harry winning the Triwizard Tournament.

Successfully finishing the Wolfsbane with Hermione for the first time.

Making Ron forgive Harry with a duel.

Playing Quidditch with the Weasleys at the Burrow.

Watching Hagrid walk back into the Great Hall from Azkaban.

Theo giving back Astaroth.

Nothing happened for any of it, so Draco decided that the problem could be the red line itself. Maybe, by definition, everything from that was stolen, so he tried memories from the blue line, and even the blue loop.

Walking out of Azkaban for the first time.

Hearing Mother get pardoned with only probation.

Harry saving me from Fiendfyre.

Finding out Aunt Bella had been killed in the Battle of Hogwarts.

Realizing I figured out how to work the Vanishing Cabinet.

Catching the Snitch against Hufflepuff... catching the Snitch against Ravenclaw...

Playing Quidditch with everyone at Vince's eleventh birthday party.

Nothing was happening either, not even when Draco resorted to the obscene and began to pull up memories of happiness in the vulgar sense. *The first time I sucked Theo off. The first time he fucked me. The last night we ever spent together, all those times in a row- before he threw me out and told me he never wanted to see me again, but don't think about that part... that one time in sixth year, when I came back from home and tried to tell him about Aunt Bella being there for Christmas and what she'd done, and he didn't want to hear, so he just pressed me down on the bed and fingered me until I was crying from how bad I needed it...*

Come to think of it, it was hard to term all of those *happy* memories, precisely.

So he turned to imagination, substituting Harry in each of those situations in turn. But his wand was still frustratingly Squib-like. Why was he bothering switching it around? Remus had laid it out for him. The problem wasn't the memories or fantasies and their strength, or even the wand, but the thought process behind the images' construction and utilization. There was some puncture there in his psychological tissue, some impasse or gap he couldn't get himself beyond...

What would have been the most perfect, the most untainted happiness? The most beautiful thing he could imagine, which would have absolved him of every guilt? More perfect than even the touch of Harry Potter?

Draco closed his eyes and imagined the moment in the graveyard when Avada Kedavra had hit Wormtail. Then he imagined the curse sailing right to his target, and hitting Voldemort between the eyes. Those red snake eyes going blank as the monster crumbled to the dirt-

"Expecto patronum!"

When Draco opened his eyes, there was a dragon, a bright wispy bluish silver curling out of the burst of light at the tip of the talon wand. He could see the dragon staring at him for a moment, the twin of the Antipodean Opaleye on his wall, a charm that had lived with Theo for a brief time under the name of Astaroth- almost too beautiful to wear with his iridescent prism shine, his narrow body and massive wings flaring like a double axe, shimmering with every shade in the world of ultraviolet...

Yes, the Patronus seemed to radiate a paled ultraviolet light, the same fire-hot shine of Protego Diabolica, but more regal, like a vision of Astaroth himself. Deep and solid and permanent, he reared its long, slender, flared silver head and surged forward. Draco could

only watch in awe as the Patronus soared around the room whose chosen hues matched its moonlight colors. He almost seemed something destined to turn on Draco and burn him off the face of the Earth, except he had been the one to make him...

And as Astaroth tossed his head and soared outwards, out of the door and circling over the top of the stairs in a proud sweep of his wings, a startled cry showed he had not been without prey.

Thrown at Draco's feet by his Patronus, though, was not some cowering, scaled Dementor, but the wide, awed green eyes of Harry Potter, his suitcase fallen to the ground beside him.

Moonstones and Malice

Chapter Notes

Hi, everyone! Thanks so much for all your thoughts on the first part! I appreciate the playlist suggestions- I love seeing music that goes along with the fic- and the playlist for the fic is not pre-set, so I will definitely implement the suggestions if they fit the current chapter :)

For those curious about the dom/sub tag, that was kind of inevitable lol- I am, like, physically incapable of writing anything which does not have at least undertones that way. As I hope was shown previously, Draco is indeed the one with the bottom/sub vibes. Sorry for anyone who prefers the other way! I myself find it easier/more comfortable to write from the dominant perspective, but I think a lot about the psychology of my characters, and that is definitely the way I've drawn Draco in my head.

And Draco's Patronus did not physically carry Harry to him, that was just a figure of speech lol ^^

Anyway, enjoy! <3

Playlist

"I did always think your Patronus would be a dragon."

The appearance of Harry seemed to make the Patronus disappear at once, as if happiness inevitably died beside him.

"I *am* glad it wasn't, like, a goat or something," Draco said weakly, and went over and offered Harry a hand up. The first sign all was not well was Harry ignoring his hand and getting up on his own.

The second sign was Harry starting to yell at him.

"So you've been learning a lot, haven't you? Living with Professor Lupin?" It could have been a friendly comment, but the tone and raised volume made it clear how very much it wasn't.

"Wait, Harry, if you want to yell, come inside..." Draco dragged Harry and his case into his room, casting a Featherlight charm, but with every spell cast, Harry just seemed to get angrier. When Draco cast Inmotus instead of his usual Muffliato, Harry looked confused but still annoyed. At least vengeful was an intriguingly good look on this newly fifteen-year-old Harry Potter.

"What is that?" Harry demanded, tossing his lightened case aside in disgust. "When did you learn *that*?" In the month they had been apart, Harry had cut his hair short. As much as Draco had liked his longer hair, this style made Harry look more grown-up. Which was not a good realization to be having, when Harry was with him in his room looking at him like a war criminal- which he *was*, but *Harry* didn't know that...

"It's an Imperturbable charm," Draco explained. "I just picked it up, Mrs. Weasley started using it to keep out the Extendable Ears." He'd spoken without thinking, so at Harry's annoyed look at something else he didn't understand, he quickly added, "Those are these devices Fred and George have made, we've been using them to eavesdrop on meetings of the Order of the Phoenix-"

"'We'," Harry echoed, and Draco thought he might be done yelling, but his voice raised until he was practically screeching at him. "You mean, you and Ron and Hermione? Mrs. Weasley told me to go see them. But I heard your voice! Sirius wouldn't tell me anything, so I sent all of you letters, and you've all just *been* here, and nobody even wrote me back!"

"Hedwig is here," Draco said, trying to address one small frustration, but that was just taking one drop of water out of what felt like a hurricane forming. "Harry, we all wanted to write back to you, but the Order forbade it- Hedwig nearly pecked Ron half to death-"

"I wanted answers!" Harry yelled, lowering all the distance Draco had put between them to zero again. Suddenly, Draco wished his room was not so beautiful, as every small prettiness in it seemed another potential gall to Harry, another thing Draco had and he didn't. "And I thought you of all people would at least give them to me! Since when have *you* cared about rules?"

"You have the two-way mirror. And Remus said that Dumbledore thought you were safest with the Muggles-"

"Yeah? Have *you* been attacked by Dementors this summer?" Harry persisted, and his shorter hair had made his green eyes look even bigger, leveled on Draco like another accusation, the most potent of the lot. "Guess you'd be ready if you were! Private Defense lessons from Lupin- and from *my godfather*- as if you needed them- you must not have *any* weaknesses anymore-"

"People from the Order have been following you, in case you haven't figured that out by now!" Draco snapped back, unable to keep his own volume from raising. "You're still what everyone's been concerned about, protecting you-"

Harry seemed to hate the reminder of his own vulnerability. "You don't think you all could have done that better from here? No, I guess there's only room for one new *child* for the happy couple!" he exclaimed, gesturing around the room with the jealousy Draco had feared. "You've all been so happy without me, haven't you? You said you'd gotten me a godfather, Draco! You acted like you did all that for *me*, but you don't care about me, all you did was get yourself an uncle! And if the Dementors hadn't come, I would have just had to stay with the Dursleys, and you- *you* would have just spent the whole summer up here in your personal kingdom, with *my* godfather and *my* friends, *forgetting about me*-"

I couldn't forget about you if I tried. You don't know how I've tried. "I couldn't *go* home, Harry! You know why! Would you rather I have tortured you like I was told? Because I can do that curse, believe me! Except it's probably good I didn't, because it seems getting it once has already messed up your mind beyond repair- they're *your* friends more than mine, all of them, Sirius wanted you here, it was Dumbledore who wouldn't let him-"

"Why?" Harry demanded. It was like he had understood in one look the life Draco had gotten for himself here, and couldn't bear the contrast with the life he had led at the same time. "Oh, congratulations on *not torturing me*, Draco, high bar you've set for yourself-"

"Don't act like you know how hard it was!" Draco snapped, because it was true, Harry had always taken it for granted, Draco coming over to his side, like he never saw what it cost him. "You have no idea- going against my parents, you don't have any idea what that's like-"

"Of course I don't!" Harry screamed at the top of his lungs, "BECAUSE I DON'T HAVE ANY PARENTS! I DON'T HAVE ANYTHING, AND YOU GET EVERYTHING! And you could have written to me *something* real, you could have done that much, but you don't care about me at all! No one does! Four weeks stuck in Privet Drive, getting told nothing by Sirius, nicking papers out of bins to try and find out what's been going on, while you decorate your new bloody room! YOU OWE ME, DRACO! I'm the one who saved your life in that graveyard! I'm the one who fought off Voldemort, *you* couldn't kill him! You needed me to save you like *always*!"

Draco had fallen to sit on his bed. He might have been hurt, if it wasn't all very true. And the surrealness of Harry saying these things, when he usually hated being praised or called a hero, showed he was at the end of his tether. There was something wrong with Harry. Very wrong.

"I saved you from your father! I saved you from the Great Lake! I had to fight in the tournament when I didn't want to and everyone hated me for it, and all you did was yell at me for helping Cedric! I saved you from the Dementors that *your godfather* set on us, because you were too stupid to know he'd set us up! I saved your whole stupid evil house from them! I saved you from Riddle, I killed a Basilisk, and you just made *fun* of me for it! Nothing is ever good enough for you! I saved the Philosopher's Stone! I saved Hogwarts from the Chamber of Secrets! I saved *you*, Draco, I've saved you so many times, and I get nothing back from you! NOTHING!"

Harry was leaned over him, one hand braced on the bed. The smell of magic was sharper off him, like it tended to be when he got like this, like its heat could discharge accidentally at any time. Except the scent of it was stronger. That was a lot of power to have this angry at him, and yet Draco was not afraid, nor even angry back anymore. All he could feel was the rush of that nearness, more alive than he had felt since saying goodbye at Hogwarts.

"What, then, Harry," Draco hissed, feeling the tension in the air like dry lightning. "What do you want *back* for my life? What *reward* does the Chosen One demand for his services?"

Harry's face went very red, put at a loss. "I didn't- I didn't mean it like- not like *that*- I-"

Harry was saved by an insistent rapping, recognizable as Hermione's pointed knock, as if there had been softer ones going on for a bit that they had failed to notice. Draco let out a sigh and lifted the enchantment with a wave of his wand, then gestured again and sent the door flying open. He knew he shouldn't be showing off his magic right now, but he was feeling too lazy to get up and let them in. Facing Harry had him already tired to the bone.

"Draco, your-" Ron began, as soon as the door opened, only to stop and light up when he saw Draco wasn't alone. "Harry! Should have known we'd find you here!"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Harry snapped, only for Hermione to shriek and try to hug the life out of him.

"Oh, Harry, I've been so worried! I wish we could have told you everything!" she sniffled, which was exactly what Draco should have started with. Yet the words still just put more irritation on that handsome, implacable visage, the outrage of someone who had decided himself abandoned, and wasn't about to acknowledge anything that would shake his conviction of that. "It's so good to see you! I can't believe that Dementors-"

"Well, we're all safe from the Dementors now, Draco can do a Patronus," Harry bit out with positively un-Gryffindorish sarcasm.

Hermione was fool enough to react honestly. "Oh, Draco, you finally managed one?" She detached herself to run over and hug Draco excitedly. "Frankenstein, I can't believe it! That's so wonderful-"

Ron at least seemed to see that Harry was not in the mood to hear Draco fawned over. "Good to see you, mate," he said, and Harry dodged his attempt at a hug completely. Ron's face fell, but then he looked between them all with calculation. Draco could see it on his face as he judged that Draco was the problem in this equation. "Draco, we were just coming to tell you that your godfather is here-"

"Severus?" Draco cried out, and was the one foolish enough to react honestly then. Ron nodded, and Draco raced down the stairs. Severus hadn't been here all summer, nor had he written or sent books. The Order had just occasionally received coded communications about the work he was doing as a spy. "Severus, you're here?" He wanted to catch him before he got swallowed up in an Order meeting. He could hear the sound of footsteps behind him. "Severus!" he yelled, but when he got to the final flight, he could see a billow of black robes heading into the meeting room, head turned away from him-

"Expecto patronum!" Draco yelled, the image of Voldemort dead at his feet in his mind's eye. The Antipodean Opaleye surged out of the end of the talon wand once again, and flew right at its target.

Severus didn't fall over as Harry had, or even duck, just faced the assault of the dragon Patronus with bemusement and then what looked to be amused indulgence, as the dragon flew in gleeful circles around him, preening and showing off its great wingspan.

"Severus!" Draco yelled a final time, and charged and nearly knocked Severus over by hugging him so hard, with the entire Order staring from behind him.

"My burdensome godson," Severus sighed, and the dark circles under his eyes were daunting, a new sallow gauntness. But he was here, he was alive, and he wasn't currently under Cruciatus, all distinct improvements from what Draco had been imagining in his absence. He tightened his grip and refused to let go.

"I have a meeting to attend. But naturally this vain boy must hold it up to show off his shiny new trick, and carry on like I've risen from the grave and returned from the dead-"

But you have, Severus. You have. "I'll let you go to your meeting on one condition!"

"And what could that be?" Severus said dryly, but his attention had gone from Draco to behind him. The trio had caught up, with Hermione looking relieved to see Severus, Ron relieved but wary, and Harry homicidally jealous, all perfectly on brand. "State your demands, child."

"If you promise you'll stay at least a few hours after! You don't have to come to dinner, Severus, but we can eat together- I missed you *so much*-"

"Whatever you like," Severus said hurriedly, shaking off Draco's arms as if diseased, looking mortified by the public show of affection. "Just leave me be, you great clinging Hippogriff, you're embarrassing yourself."

Draco let him go, nodding happily. Severus stalked into the room, door slamming behind him. When Draco turned, though, the sheer pitch and scale that homicidal jealousy had reached on Harry's face made him regret the effusiveness of that display. Harry might very well be comparing the welcome he'd received. But if Harry had wanted affection, he could have screamed at Draco, like, a *little* less?

Though in fairness, it seemed Harry's wounded feeling towards Draco was almost too strong to hold back. Even once Ron and Hermione sat Harry down to catch him up on everything he had missed. When Draco tried to chime in, Harry got this air like it took everything in him not to blow up again.

Draco let the others do the talking. At one point, though, when Ron asked Harry if he'd trouble driving away the Dementors, Harry's answer made it hard to stay impassive.

"I just thought about you and Hermione," Harry said earnestly, "And how if I died, I'd never see the two of you again."

Ron and Hermione looked touched, but then exchanged glances, doing their best not to look at Draco at the omission. Harry noticed their silence and Draco's paling face, and seemed to misinterpret. "Oh, and Luna," Harry added, "I thought of seeing her again too," and Draco got up with a forced smile.

"I need to check on the potions," Draco said through his teeth. "Severus will want to see them."

Draco knelt down above the cauldron of angel's infusion, trying to let the scent of the angelica calm the heavy fizzing feeling beginning in him. He didn't think he was going to cry,

so his tears weren't likely to contaminate the potions. But he was beginning to have the sinking sensation that he might need to take advantage of Severus's presence to request more draught of peace. He should have been brewing some on his own. Compared to these potions, it wasn't difficult, he didn't know why he hadn't...

You told Harry no. You probably broke his stupid fragile Gryffindor heart. You wanted to drive him away. You're surely not pathetic enough to lose it over the fact that you succeeded...

"Just sitting breathing fumes of cauldrons," Severus said dryly, "Is no good for you, Draco."

"Hey," Draco said bleakly. Severus could surely tell how Draco's mood had plummeted since they had last spoken, but he just took Draco's shoulder and guided him to sit further away from the cauldrons. Then he took Draco's place and began to examine their contents.

He declared the angel's infusion 'competent enough not to actively poison my godson'. He was less pleased to hear it was occasioned so often by duels with Sirius, which Severus called a colossal waste of time.

"But he always beats me!" Draco protested.

"Because," Severus said coolly, "You are forbidden from using your full arsenal. In a real duel, you are so beyond Black it would be laughable." Draco was starting to see what Remus meant, when he said Sirius and Severus didn't do much to keep Draco from getting arrogant. "Your magic already has a dark core, Draco, and if you are able to produce a Patronus now, that indicates that the darkness is not atrophying the light core as the Assessor feared." Draco chose to leave out Periander's real report, delivered in a graveyard. "In a real fight, you will resort to whatever spells you judge the most likely to keep you alive. Whatever the arbitrary designation of *type of magic* belongs to them."

It was such that they ended up in the dueling room while the rest of the Order, including Harry, were at dinner. No doubt it was as delicious as always from Molly Weasley, but she had said she would set aside plates, even as Severus made a grimace to indicate it unnecessary. Harry looked annoyed Draco was skipping his first dinner back, but Draco might need an hour or two before he stopped hearing Harry in his head saying, *I thought of Ron and Hermione and how I'd miss them too much, and oh, Luna too...*

Yes, Draco had more than enough aggression to fuel any magic requested.

"You once asked my assistance with your magic," Severus intoned, "And I refused. Consider this my own assessment, Draco, of what you have left to learn. I will be very busy at school this year, with my... new responsibilities. You will still have access to my facilities, but you will find me less frequently inside. So I will see what you can do *now*."

"Won't it get you in trouble with the Dark Lord?" Draco blurted, the unspoken anxiety that had oppressed him this past month finding voice. "At school, if you still act like-"

"On the contrary," Severus said, lowering his voice. "This is information I will only share with you, Dumbledore, and Lupin. Do not go spreading it, even to the interfering Miss

Granger. In the meetings I have been privy to at Malfoy Manor and elsewhere, your name has not been without mention."

He smirked at Draco's fearful look. "And not because of what you think. Your father has managed to convince everyone you did intend to kill Wormtail. Either it is that unthinkable that a fourth-year would have stood up and tried to use the Killing curse on the Dark Lord, or it is that *inconvenient* a fact for it to have happened, for everyone involved, the Dark Lord included. So to them, you murdered Wormtail on purpose, with the opportunism of youth, out of a misguided loyalty to your uncle. I told them the story of your third year, when Black contacted you and lured you into pursuing Wormtail with him."

"So vengeance against me isn't a top item on the agenda?" Draco asked weakly, though the sound of Sirius's name gave him misgivings. Whatever detente had been reached between Sirius and Severus, or at least *Remus* and Severus, Draco did not think Severus would hesitate to throw Sirius under the bus at the first opportunity. If he hadn't already.

"Vengeance?" Severus bit out a bitter laugh. "You know these people less well than you think. What do you believe the Dark Lord values most? It is not loyalty."

"He, uh... he called me pretty a lot. In the graveyard. He said it was good to have a body, to look at things of beauty again..."

"Yes," Severus said with distaste, looking like he was smelling sour milk as he acknowledged it. "The Dark Lord does seem somewhat... taken with you. But it is not mere physicality that will attract a man of his depravity. Do you know what he most strongly desires in a companion?"

"Power? But what does that have to do with me?"

"Do not be naive. You were chosen by your aunt's wand at eleven. You are a prodigy in a number of subjects, especially Potions, Charms, Transfiguration, and *dueling.* Stories of your prowess were well spread to your housemates' parents once you were suspected Heir of Slytherin, let alone afterwards. Your father is parading around stories of your assessment as proof that you are some great dark wizard in training. To protect you, I have echoed them. Vengeance? Draco, the Dark Lord's ends for you involve *recruitment.*"

Draco felt a cold shiver go through him. Severus gave him a wan non-smile. "Is it a comfort, to know you retain a choice between sides?" Draco nodded, and Severus looked more severe. "It should not be. The life I am living, the life of a spy, is no life at all. I would have you certain of which side you belong to and never stray from it. But it will be useful to let the Dark Lord think you may be swayed for as long as possible. I have been admonished for not utilizing my influence as godfather *enough*, to draw you away from being corrupted by your uncle. Some even speak of the possibility of turning *Black*, now that Wormtail is gone. Though some others simply speak of killing him as priority, to sever *you* from this side."

"So they want me as a weapon," Draco said heavily, staring down at his hands and remembering when THIEF had been blazoned across his right palm in Harry's handwriting. "And they won't hurt me while they still think they could claim me as one. Even my father wouldn't. Because I could be *useful.*"

"This naiveté again, Draco?" Severus said impatiently. "What do you think *this* side wishes of you? Why do you think your uncle duels you nightly? *Sharpening the blade.* Sooner or later, everyone will choose a side in the coming war, and a wizard of your strength cannot hide when that time comes. My wish is to delay that time a little longer. For when you cannot... I *will* see what your true power is, apart from these lily-livered Gryffindors and their arbitrary lines."

"I'll show you anything you want," Draco said, and conjured a half dozen dummies, his usual sandbags. Severus frowned and changed them to more realistic-looking figures, something like the life-size chessmen that Ron had faced under the trapdoor in first year. "I know the Unforgivables. I've used them all. But only the Killing curse on a human. And I'd... you would rather I don't do that again, wouldn't you?"

"Your father," Severus said with a grimace, "Has not been shy spreading tales of your prowess with the curses of my invention: Langlock and Sectumsempra. Demonstrate Langlock." The mouth of the dummy had its fake tongue locked up. "Now Sectumsempra." Though it was not sand, an invisible sword cleanly slashed through all the limbs of that dummy, reducing it to a pile of doll parts on the unsanded wood floor.

"If you are in a situation that feels like it calls for the Killing curse, use Sectumsempra instead- a syllable shorter, easier off the tongue if you cannot cast it non-verbally, without the telltale green light. Not an Unforgivable. And yet likely to have the same result. Knowledge of the countercurse for Sectumsempra is uncommon, and rarer still to be pulled off in time. I will teach you the countercurse soon, as you have insisted. Your prowess with Sectumsempra may serve you well indeed. Now you will go through with the next unfortunate dummy, and demonstrate every spell that you think might be dark magic against it."

"Oscausi!" Draco cast, more eager than he should have been. But it was rare he got a chance like this to impress Severus. "I did that to Rita Skeeter," he said brightly, and earned an eye-roll that seemed to go on for half a minute. "Baubillious!" he cast, and the lightning bolt drove the mouthless dummy to a sparking, smoking heap by the back wall. "I wasn't sure if that's dark magic..."

"It is, based on the energy it uses," Severus sighed, "Although many would not recognize it as such. Have you used it in dueling with Black and gone unreprimanded?" Draco nodded, and chose not to share that he had attempted to teach the spell to Harry as well. "Good. What else?"

Severus seemed to have high expectations. On one hand, Draco's level was high for someone of his age, but on the other, based on the spells Severus had *invented* at this age, Draco was still far behind the level of his godfather. Severus would be right to be unimpressed. Someday, Draco might want to invent some curses, if he could learn the theory...

"Serpensortia," Draco cast, and Severus rolled his eyes again. "Vipera evanesca," he said hastily, Vanishing the snake when Severus looked unimpressed. "I think I might be able to cast Fiendfyre, but I wouldn't... I don't ever want... I saw you cast Manibipiscatus, is that dark?"

"No," Severus said, voice bored.

"An invention of yours?"

"Yes," Severus intoned, still more bored.

"Conjunctivo!" Draco cast, and blinded the third dummy. "Flagrante!" he shouted, and when he made one dummy collide with the other, it seared it, making Severus look at least slightly more interested. "I find it useful combined with Oppugno, sir..."

Severus's nod had Draco getting excited, lashing out at the remaining dummies to show off. He had been going back to old lessons from the blue loop this summer, and practicing on his own. He had some things to show off.

"Engorgio skullus!" he shouted, increasing the size of the head, then, "Redactum skullus!" shrinking it down to the smallest possible. It made it easy for aim for the neck, as he cast Praefoco. There might not be actual air to suffocate, but the plastic of the neck visibly constricted. Then Draco cast it aside with a yell of Aruspices mitte, and all of the plastic inside the shell was expelled like real entrails.

"Ossio dispersimus!" Draco yelled at the next dummy, for each of its arms, turning what would have been bones to limp jelly, then, "Serpensmorta!" Snakes came out from his wand and coiled around the dummy, its limp arms encircled and squeezed. As the fourth dummy fell under the pool of writhing snakes, Draco called, "Sectilis procella!" and darts of air shot out from his wand and impacted the fifth like tiny invisible arrows, leaving lacerations behind each strike. He let them keep hitting until the dummy was pecked to pieces.

Towards the sixth, he bellowed "Flagello!" and a whip made of flame shot out of his wand. He cracked it in the air, and with a sizzling hiss, a single slash sent the final dummy splitting vertically in half. When the dummies were a pile of burned, broken, and mutated parts at their feet, Draco turned towards Severus, eager for his approval.

Instead of looking impressed, though, he was... not fearful, but not nearly as comfortable in Draco's presence as he had been. "Draco..." he said, the name a question rather than a certainty. "Where *did* you learn all of *those* spells? I know it wasn't Black and Lupin."

"Books," Draco said defensively, pocketing his wand. "Lots of books. And my father, a while ago. I thought... is it not good, that I have a good repertoire of dark spells too, if I need them?"

He'd mainly learned them from Aunt Bella, in truth, in the summers after fifth and sixth year. And he was far better at them now than he had ever been then. Some of them he had learned in theory but never successfully cast until this summer in the red line. He'd never managed to cast Praefoco in the blue loop, for one, with enough force to give more than mild discomfort, let alone crush a windpipe. And he'd envied Aunt Bella's flaming whip, but never been able to manipulate it like she did. Now it was easy as Wingardium Leviosa.

Severus's mind pushed at his shields with a force it never had before. Draco wondered whether so much time constantly in fear of his life had aggravated Severus's paranoia, or if this was just something that had been building too long to be ignored.

"And how, *Draco Malfoy*, did you learn *Occlumency*?" Severus bit out, gaze searing.

Draco shrugged. "Severus, I think my shields are naturally strong. I'm lucky. And you've seen all of the notebooks I carry, with the invisible ink in them? One of them is dedicated just to Occlumency." That part was true, even if Draco had received Occlumency lessons from Aunt Bella before sixth year, and a few from Severus himself. "I do a lot of research on my own. I don't have to work hard in class, so when I'm in the library, I'm studying subjects that will be useful for me. Like Occlumency. And curses. Because I'm going to be an Unspeakable-"

"Stop that," Severus snapped. "You told me in third year that you had made that up as a lie, an excuse to study all the time and keep people at bay, or have you forgotten? Legilimens!" His mind seemingly pierced into Draco's and yet got nowhere. Severus gripped at his head, and then had pulled back the spell, clutching at his temples after. "Shadows! All I see is dark and floating shadows! Draco, has it escaped your attention how drastically you changed in almost every way, between the child I met in *June* of 1991, on your eleventh birthday, and the person who you were when you came to Hogwarts, in just that *September*?"

"Of course not," Draco said warily. For the thousandth time, he would have confessed if he could have. But without the ability to explain, all he could was do was deflect, for fear Severus would come up with a darker explanation than even the truth. "I must have been a lot quieter, and I'd spent more time studying magic..."

"I speak, of course," Severus said carefully, "Of the talon wand you acquired. What other explanation could there be for such a transformation? Before you found it, Draco, your magic was unexceptional- do not make that face, I do not call it so now- and your personality typical for your age and upbringing. Recently, I heard the Dark Lord ask your father if you had been a prodigy as a young child. He was forced to answer in the negative. But *after* the wand... sometimes I wonder who it is you will become with that wand in your hand."

Draco wondered, with an impotent anger, whether the invitation to show off and cast dark curses had been a trap. He decided not to tell Severus what he and Theo had learned last year about the wand's origins.

"I hear you have devised a spell, Cauterizo, to make what you call 'the Talon Brand'," Severus went on, "Your personal Dark Mark, burn on your uncle's hand. Merlin knows what other plans you have for it. If you are not careful, you may find yourself taking after your wand's former owner more than you would prefer. Your aunt was not *always* mad-"

"Please don't tell me how terrible a person I am," Draco said in a small bleak voice. "I just got it from Harry Potter an hour ago, I can't take it from you too this soon. Can you save it for next time?" There would be a next time. He couldn't stand the thought there wouldn't be, that every time he saw his godfather could be the last, in part because his ties to Draco rendered him more vulnerable. "We went through this in first year-"

"Do you remember the man who did your assessment? Pammaque Periander?" Severus asked, and Draco nodded cautiously. "Your father sought him out recently, to back up his boasts to the Dark Lord. It was the first contact any Death Eater made with him since your assessment. I went to his cottage in the remote woods of Cornwall myself, when he failed to

respond. Have you seen or spoken to him at all since your assessment?" Draco lied by shaking his head. "I found his body inside. He had been dead for months."

"How?" Draco asked, and Severus watched him very closely as he answered,

"I wasn't sure. Some form of poison by all appearances. Perhaps a variety of snake venom."

Draco left the dueling room shaken, the image of Periander's body slow to leave his mind, when combined with the memory of his own blood dripping over the corpse of Maledictum. So the man had followed. Draco wondered if it was the same mysterious rotting that had killed the Augurey, or if it was something or someone else. And Severus was not done with the dismaying news.

"I burned the body, and sent an anonymous owl to his ancient mother, advising her of her inheritance of the property and his income. He did not seem to have any other family or connections. Under the circumstances, I thought best to keep it quiet. But his will did not leave *everything* to his mother." He withdrew a small package wrapped in black velvet. Draco unfurled the velvet, only to nearly drop it once he saw what was inside: the moonstone-hilted ceremonial dagger that Periander had used for the ritual in the Hogsmeade graveyard.

Both Draco and Periander's blood had been on the blade. Draco knew not how many others.

"Why would he leave you this?" Severus asked.

But he had to step in front, and Draco hastily pocket the dagger, when a more cheerful voice came down the hall towards them.

"Cousin!" Tonks exclaimed. "And Severus! Cousin Draco, why didn't you ever tell me *you* were the one with Sirius that I dueled! Harry said-" She went on at length about the subject, which had come up during a discussion of throwing fireballs. Harry had been so immoderate as to explain both who taught them to him, and how that person had learned them. In front of a table full of the entire Order- save Severus, who knew already, having been the person to anonymously send Tonks after Draco in the first place.

"I didn't want her to know!" Draco hissed furiously to Hermione, as they joined the others in the sitting room, waiting for Mrs. Weasley to produce food for him and Severus, while Tonks made jokes about magical music boxes, some of the less family-friendly kind. "I don't need any more enemies!"

Tonks seemed to be taking the revelation better than Draco would have. His pride would have been dented, losing to a schoolchild, but she probably knew that even put together, even doubled, her partners had been far less skilled than Sirius. So she could smile and joke about it. Yet somewhere in the back of her mind, Draco would still likely never lose his categorization as a potential enemy.

The Auror protégé of Mad-Eye Moody was *not* an enemy he ever wanted. Especially with the blood that ran through her veins. She looked like Aunt Bella from certain angles, purple hair or not. Just in the eyes. The purple hair looked like camouflage to him, a deliberate attempt

not to be taken seriously. And he was sure that if she hadn't seen a resemblance to Aunt Bella in Draco as well, she would be damn sure seeing it now.

That was the trouble with a person being a weapon. Any weapon could turn in the hand.

"Harry didn't know!" Hermione whispered back, looking over at a still sour-faced Harry guiltily. "I'm sorry, I tried to stop him, but..." Draco could imagine her telling Harry that *Draco wants to keep it a secret*, and Harry blabbing to the world all the faster after the fight they'd had. Spite filled his chest, close to spilling out at the mouth, and he forced himself from hard experience to withdraw himself from the situation, rather than let it out like he wanted to.

"Whatever," Draco muttered, "I'm exhausted, I need a bath," and Hermione looked at him askance.

"Draco," she asked in that long-suffering way of hers, "Why does your jumper have that long new singe mark?"

"Oh," Draco said, touching his sleeve. Sure enough, the lovely mint green cashmere, a replacement from the first present of his mother's ruined at Grimmauld, had the seared imprint of the flame whip along the whole forearm. He must have caught himself and not noticed. At least none of the skin seemed charred beneath. "I'm going to have to work on that," he said absently, then forced a tired grin at Hermione. "Trust me, Striker, you don't want to know."

"Please don't be mad at Harry for *that*," was all she said after. "He didn't mean to spill your secrets. I should have warned him about Tonks. And... I don't *think* he meant what he said about the Patronus to mean he doesn't care about you. His feelings are just... complicated, when it comes to you. Not like the rest of us. He'll calm down once he's been away from the Dursleys for longer. They're poisonous."

Draco got to sleep late, having had to have an infusion bath, as much from mental as physical or magical exhaustion in truth. He had also gotten advice on brewing draught of peace from Severus before he left, along with assurances they would be covering be it this year in Potions, as standard for the curriculum. A final look showed Draco that in Severus's mind, the issues they had discussed in the dueling room were far from settled.

Draco couldn't sleep for some time after that, even though he had done his best to avoid Harry, and prevented another explosion. That didn't help avoid *thinking* about him. He eventually gave up on avoiding his bad habit, and worked out the final bit of tension to let himself sleep, by thinking of Harry as he had been that afternoon, glaring at him like he was the scum of the Earth.

That should have been disenchanting, but it wasn't. It just made Draco in his mind all the more desperate to please, to do whatever Harry ordered him in order to forgive him. And in Draco's terrible mind, Harry ordered *such* demeaning things. Bad enough for Draco's release to hit twice as hard as usual, before he could spell away the evidence, curl up, and dream of green eyes promising further punishment, with a moonstone dagger in that perfect hand.

Draco saw those green eyes again long before morning, and there was nothing in them of anger anymore. "Hey," a voice whispered, waking him from sleep, and the first thing Draco heard after that was a distinct sizzling. Draco's eyes shot open, and found that his arm had already shot out to his nightstand, grabbed his wand, and shoved the point to the intruder's forehead. Which, in this case, meant a scar that seemed to sizzle and throb beneath the touch of it.

"Harry?" Draco whispered, and with a wave of his wand, all the bluebell flames came glowing back to life. "Caeruleum inflamarae." A heatless crown of blue flames linked around the room, pale enough that the light was white as well as blue-tinged over Harry's waiting face. He was in his pajamas, his hair even more of a mess than usual, without even his glasses on to obscure the troubled look on his face. And he hadn't seemed to particularly mind having Draco's wand jabbed into his scar. "Sorry, it was just reflex... you startled me..."

"Oh, it's okay," Harry said with a harsh laugh, "It hurts already anyway." Draco scooted over under the covers, and Harry took that as the invitation it was to sit down with him. "Sorry, I thought you'd still be awake. I don't know why. I can just go." He had the eyes of someone who had just had a nightmare.

"You don't have to," Draco said softly. "Ron and Hermione asleep? Don't worry. I can give you a calming draught, or a draught of peace. You know I have some for my anxiety..."

"I didn't come for a potion," Harry whispered, eyes darkening. "I just..."

Please let him not have come to yell at Draco some more. Both his ego and his libido might not be able to withstand it. "Want to talk about your nightmare? Did you see the Dark Lord?"

"I do sometimes," Harry admitted, "But not tonight. It was just this dream I've been having, of this long dark corridor. All the doors are locked, and I need to go further, but I can't. And every time I hit the same dead end, it feels like if I don't get through, I'll have failed, and..."

His voice trailed off, and Draco tried to raise his spirits. At least he could provide one thing in Harry's life that was still reliable, albeit reliably irritating. "Failed to what? To save me?" Draco sighed, then propped his chin on his hand and widened his eyes at him. "You've done it *so much*, Harry, I don't know what I'd do without you, my *hero*..."

"Please, don't," Harry breathed, looking embarrassed by the reminder. "I didn't mean all that, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I yelled at you. I missed you at dinner and the tour Sirius gave me... I asked if I could stay up here in your room, but Remus said that wouldn't be a good idea..."

"And why could that be?" Draco purred, lowering his eyelashes lazily, too unguarded when just awoken not to let where his mind went show on his face. At least he should be able to distract Harry like that. "What did Remus think I would do to you once lured into the dragon's lair?"

Harry's face turned a distinct pink under the blue-white glow, turned an almost misted silver off the metallic walls. It suited him even more than everything already seemed to, giving him

that ethereal otherworldly look, where otherwise his shorter hair had made him look tough and unapproachable. Without his glasses, he already looked adorably defenseless, having to lean in close to see Draco clearly. "I don't know. Punish me for leaking your secrets to Tonks? I really didn't know that was a secret. Honestly, I don't know how she didn't realize. Sirius said you were wearing your Arsenal hoodie that night." His gaze strayed over Draco, and Draco pulled back the covers to obligingly show what he was wearing, which, yes, included a red pair of Arsenal joggers with the name and cannon logo high on one leg. "So I'm sorry about that, alright? I just..."

"Everything's really overwhelming," Draco agreed, "And you can't be expected to keep everything straight. When she curses me in the back when I least expect it, I hope some of that Potter gold in the Gringotts vaults goes towards a *spectacular* funeral. I'm thinking a public mea culpa by the famous Saint Potter-"

"*Not* Saint Potter," Harry said, face going clouded again. "Apparently the Daily Prophet has been saying all these things about me being, I don't know- delusional, fame-seeking, crazy-"

"Where is the lie?" Draco said, throwing his arms out dramatically, and the outrage died on Harry's lips, as the gesture made Harry's eyes drop over Draco's torso. Draco didn't have a shirt on, for one of many hot summer nights in a stuffy old house. Harry seemed suddenly more aware of that fact than before. And Draco was aware of Harry being aware, and this balmy room seemed at once twice as stifling hot.

"No, really, Harry." Draco let his voice drop. "You are rather losing the plot these days, aren't you? Scared to sleep for fear of your new Boggart, a *hallway*?"

Harry had lost the ability to retort or even get offended, like he tended to when he stared at Draco like this. "I was just... I know I've been a pillock, but I guess I was just wondering if I could stay here tonight. I'll sleep on the floor, I just... I feel safe around you," he muttered. "Can I please stay?"

Though he said it under his breath, the sound of it made Draco's insides turn inside-out, body turned to a clammy mass of nerves hyperaware of Harry near him, of Harry wanting to touch him, of himself wanting so badly to be touched. Wanting so badly to wrap his arms around Harry, as just a start, if that was where this infuriating, distressingly lovable boy felt safest.

"Sure, fine," Draco sighed, "But *you're* not sleeping on the floor-"

"Why not?" Harry said. His eyes followed Draco as he got out of bed to conjure a sleeping bag, blankets, and pillows. "It's your room, I just showed up and woke you up- no, wait, don't say it, don't you dare say it- I knew it," he finished, after Draco let out his usual,

"Because you're Harry Potter. If you want to stay, you're in the bed. No arguments." Draco settled down on the floor, until all he could see was the dark shape of the bed with Harry above, and the wreathing of blue flames.

"The ceiling like this," Harry said, climbing into Draco's bed with a yawn. "It looks like when you cast that blue firestorm. In the conjured room, remember? I walked through it, and you..."

"It's called Protego Diabolica," Draco sighed, "And I have still not forgiven you for it to this day, thanks for asking. Now drink your draught of peace and go to sleep."

He slept very deeply that night, with Harry Potter safe and sound above him, under the blue firelight.

The Ministry of Magic

Chapter Notes

Hello all! Thanks so much for all your comments! I don't have a Tumblr or Kofi or anything, but I just love hearing what everyone thinks, and you can always reach me in the comments :)

Anyway, enjoy! <3

Playlist

Draco got an earful about their sleeping arrangements the next day, though he protested he had been on the floor. Sirius and Remus seemed disinclined to believe him, if only because the idea of their demanding ward willingly sleeping on the ground seemed unthinkable to them. When Ginny came up to the fracas and innocently asked why Harry and Ron could share a room, but Harry and Draco couldn't, Draco got to witness the most awkward stammering non-answer one human being had quite possibly ever given another. Remus nearly seemed to burst his appendix, trying to explain to a cheerfully uncomprehending Ginny, in a way that wouldn't get him murdered by Mrs. Weasley for having corrupted her impressionable youngest.

"She ought to know this stuff, you know," Draco whispered to Ron at breakfast. "She's Luna's age, and Luna's known all about it for ages. Boys are going to be after Ginny soon if they aren't already, she's a pretty girl- hey! Don't whack me!"

"Ginny doesn't know nothing about any of that!" Ron hissed. "And no boy is getting anywhere near *my sister*- stop muttering! What does *sister complex* mean?"

Harry was forbidden from spending the night with Draco, though he did end up coming up more nights before the trial, after nightmares. He seemed instinctively to seek out Draco, who generally had nothing more constructive to provide than making fun of him. Draco pretended not to notice the way Harry's eyes would travel over Draco's bare torso as they talked, and told himself Harry's presence had nothing to do with how it was still too hot to sleep with a shirt on.

Harry was kept busy during the days by housecleaning, with Draco's room the sole pristine part of the house. On the first full afternoon Harry was there, they emptied a bunch of glass-fronted cabinets. When Draco admitted that here was where he had found and then summoned the soporific music box, hence the large hole in one of the cases, he earned nothing but whoops of congratulations from a nearby Tonks. The Weasley twins used this as

a distraction to sneak more doxies into their pockets for some product they were devising, apparently attempting to one-up Draco for the title of Frankenstein.

Draco found he enjoyed the housecleaning more than any of the Gryffindors- so many, amassed around him like it was some kind of help center for the fashion-challenged- with many of the dark objects tossed away dismissively. Many of the artifacts that the Weasley twins didn't want, Draco managed to secret away for himself when the adults' backs were turned. Each time, Hermione's mouth would open, like the urge to tell was overwhelming. At first, pouting or affectionately flicking her H for Hermione charm sufficed to keep her silent. Eventually, he had to progress to making the Langlock tongue gesture, but that did the trick.

His yield included a self-propelling scalpel-like creature, sadly smushed by Sirius with *Nature's Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy*. Repairing the scalpel could be a project for some rainy Sunday afternoon. Draco also pocketed ancient Black seals, a heavy unopenable locket, and a gold signet ring with the Black crest that Kreacher had attempted to smuggle away. Draco fished it out of the rubbish sack, earning a suspicious but grateful look from Kreacher, who had never forgiven him mutilating the painting, but seemed willing to rethink that if he showed any modicum of respect towards his heritage.

"You seriously want to keep that?" Sirius said, wrinkling his nose. "It was my father's."

And it was gorgeous, though admitting that would be playing to the wrong crowd. "I can use it as material for some of my transfigurations," he said nonchalantly, and from the indignant squawk behind them, it sounded like he had just lost any allegiance he had gained off Kreacher.

It became noticeable as the days went on, though, how much Sirius wanted to destroy everything related to his heritage, and how little Draco wanted to allow it. Harry was quickly no longer the angriest at Draco, as Sirius met Draco's defense of various Black items with mounting frustration. It got to the point where Draco finally did have no choice but to go in league with Kreacher. Things like perfectly good fine china were at risk, simply because they had the Black crest and motto. "Just because the family was a certain thing in the past," Draco argued, "Doesn't mean you can't change what it means now. Isn't that what you're doing housing the Order here? You don't have to throw everything away, just clean it-"

"It's too much work for Kreacher to keep all this clean, clearly-"

"Then we need another house elf! We should hire Dobby to help us with all this before Hogwarts starts up again," Draco persisted. "He knows the place, he'd love to be involved- we don't have to burn everything to the ground to start over..."

The room had gone fairly quiet, as the unexpectedly ideological tinge to the debate stifled even the Weasley twins' whispered discussion about the aphrodisiac potential of Amortentia-injected earwax.

"'Toujours pur'," Sirius said, showing the motto on one of the saucers as if it was the Dark Mark. It looked to belong in that hand, curling as it was right above the bend of the talon-

shaped brand on his palm, but the revulsion on his handsome face was blatant. "Always pure. Is that something you can reclaim or redefine, Draco? *Purity*?"

"There's more than one kind of purity," Draco sniped, not even sure if he believed what he was saying anymore, or just wanted to be right. "I mean, look at Potter over here."

"Hey!" Harry blurted, "Because I'm a virgin?" and then clamped a hand over his mouth.

Every Weasley broke into hysterical laughter, while Hermione put her head in her hands. "No, I meant *moral* purity," Draco sighed, and held up a plate with Toujours pur written so proudly, its size dwarfed all the greyhounds in the crest above it. "But if 'always pure' is a phrase that *speaks* to you in that respect, by all means, repurpose it as your personal motto. Always and forever pure, Harry Potter. Ladies and gentlemen, we have a new meaning to the Black family china, heraldry, and stationery..."

The jinx shot in Draco's direction then did shatter some of the china. But in the merry chaos that ensued, Kreacher managed with surprising velocity to sneak out all the rest of the plates and saucers, so Draco counted that as a win. When Dobby was hired quietly by Remus, that was another one.

They often had more visitors to bear witness to squabbling, including a Muggle-dressed McGonagall, who walked in when he and Sirius were practically at the point of throwing hexes of their own, over the fate of a perfume bottle display with the Black crest on it. At the sound of McGonagall's bark from the classroom of "Settle down, children!" both Draco and Sirius sat down very quickly.

The more excitement there was around them, the more distracted Harry seemed. But no wonder he was having trouble sleeping, as he spent his time with days packed to the brim, too busy to think until the time came to sleep. Everything he had put off must come roaring back, even before he had to face the abyss of the dreams awaiting him like assassins hidden under the bed.

The possibility of being expelled haunted Harry, though Draco kept assuring him with blue loop-confidence that it would be fine. But mentions of Sirius's trial kept the Wizengamot in mind, and both Sirius and Harry's futures hanging in the air, just as much as whether Sirius would try to murder not just Kreacher but also Draco, for their steadily increasing hoard of dark objects and Black family memorabilia. Two categories which, needless to say, often overlapped.

At least Sirius had the outlet of dueling practice, as well as whatever Remus provided. Draco didn't think much into that, but it had to be more entertaining than the gentle mockery Draco gave Harry at night. And after Draco's dueling lessons.

While the Weasleys and Hermione dropped in every few nights or so, Harry came to watch dueling practice nightly without fail. He took each time to make obvious his resentment he was not included, though it was hard to tell whose place he would have liked to take.

"Harry, we need to limit the magic you're doing, at least before the trial comes up," Sirius would say. Anyone with eyes could see that Sirius, along with every other adult there, thought Harry already seemed so wound-up and aggressive, it would be a terrible idea for him to be pointing his wand at other human beings anytime soon.

"How is it fair," Harry complained, "That I could be expelled from Hogwarts for doing a Patronus, against a *Dementor*, when Draco can just shoot them around the house all the time whenever he wants..."

Draco and Sirius looked at each other and tuned out Harry's complaining.

But it was not idle complaints overheard the night before the trial, when Draco arrived early to the dueling room, only to see Harry and Sirius there even earlier. He closed the door, then summoned one of the twins' extendable ears and pushed it through the crack. He didn't know whether he was relieved they weren't talking about him. He didn't know anything they could have said to make him guiltier than what he heard.

"What will happen if I do get expelled?" Harry was asking, in a tone like Sirius had tried to shut down his queries already. "What if someone does snap my wand? Sirius, I'm not going back to the Dursleys forever! I'm not! I don't care if they order me. If I get expelled, I'm coming back here to Grimmauld Place to live with you and Remus!"

"I'm sure they'll clear you, Harry. There's definitely something in the International Statute of Secrecy about being allowed to use magic to save your own life-"

Harry had already been on edge since dinner, when he'd found that Dumbledore had been by the night before and hadn't visited him. Abandonment issues triggered yet again.

"But if they do expel me, can I please come back here and live with you and Remus? I don't care if you lose your trial, it doesn't matter, I'd even go on the run with you if we had to! I wouldn't mind! I wouldn't be any trouble, I promise, and I have money..."

"We'll see." Sirius's tone that meant the discussion was over.

"I'd feel a lot better about the hearing if I knew I didn't have to go back to the Dursleys..."

Sirius with his hair-trigger temper might have snapped at Harry then, if he could have missed the overt desperation in that voice. "They must be bad if you prefer this place," Sirius said uselessly.

Draco chose to end this discussion for everyone's sakes, pocketing the extendable ear before loudly entering the room.

What Harry's desperation did secure was a promise that, rather than Sirius as Padfoot trying to tag along, Harry could select one of his friends to come with him and Mr. Weasley to the Ministry, though not in to the actual courtroom. What pleased Sirius less was Harry's selection of Draco as that friend. Harry had been smart to secure the promise before dropping the name. Some Slytherin in that one after all.

Harry argued, quite correctly, that Draco could not only could help keep him calm, but already happened to have been to the Ministry, knew many of the names involved, and was a fair hand in a fight if it came to that. Draco worked hard to prove that last point in the practice duel that followed, and it was only one of those last-minute changes to Animagus form that gave Sirius victory.

Harry ended up in Draco's bedroom at three that night, complaining of the idiocy of not letting him sleep up there, when it would be them woken up early in the morning to attend the hearing anyway. "Thank you for coming," he finally said, once he ran out of steam ranting. Draco chose not to say he knew why Harry was really so angry at his godfather.

"No problem," was all Draco said. The way Harry watched him as he climbed back into bed made him achingly aware that, in fact, some of Harry's resentment really *was* because he and Draco couldn't share a bedroom, let alone a bed.

Draco barely slept that night, hardly wanting to let his mind turn all the way over to not thinking, when he could keep the image in his imagination of those greedy green eyes and the graceful slope of those shoulders... how they would look on his silvery sheets...

He might as well have not gone to bed, for how little rest he got. At least Dobby got up early with them. He and Mrs. Weasley made sure they had pristinely pressed clothes and robes, with the most delicious breakfast that could be. Still, Draco was just going to the Ministry. There didn't seem much point in him not just climbing right back in bed and wishing Harry luck...

But no, Harry said Draco made him feel safe. So Draco let the warmth of that awareness fill his chest as they left Grimmauld at a brisk walk, hand brushing the side of Harry's briefly as they passed the threshold together. Both Draco and Mr. Weasley, though, soon had their wand hands in their pockets. It was a good thing that Draco had spent summers in Hampstead with Muggles, because there were loads to wander through.

Draco had taken the Tube before with Hermione, and thought it slimy and horrifying at first, calling it the death tunnel. He had gotten somewhat more used to it since. He put on a brave face now for Harry's sake.

Harry seemed distracted by what he clearly thought his impending doom at the Ministry, but left on that with being impressed by Draco. Draco was able to handle Muggle money, buy them the tickets, and help an awed Mr. Weasley navigate. He knew London far better than not just Mr. Weasley, but Harry. Harry didn't seem to begrudge him the opportunity to show off.

"See, Hermione's right," was all Harry whispered, while Mr. Weasley queried a bewildered-looking pair of nearby elderly Muggles about what their walkers were for. "I bet you could pass a Muggle Studies OWL if you tried."

It really was a good thing Draco had gone along, because Mr. Weasley was soon not doing a great job with the keeping Harry calm aspect of the enterprise. Draco himself felt his pulse skyrocket when they entered an unfamiliar area of London, skyscrapers taller here than any

he had been under. The Ministry entrance was away from the impressive skyscrapers, in an area that looked rather a dump. They got in through a telephone box, a real struggle to get all three in. Draco felt his hair swing into Harry's face and rather smother it, but Harry didn't seem bothered.

"I've always wondered what scent it is you use, Draco," he mumbled, "With your hair," and Draco hissed *Diospyros lotus,* in a tone like the name was also a Medusa spell to turn his hair to snakes. Harry laughed softly into the strands, sending a shiver over Draco's ear, while Mr. Weasley dialed a number into the receiver.

"Welcome to the Ministry of Magic," a woman's voice welcomed them. "Please state your name and business."

"Er... Arthur Weasley, Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office, here to escort Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy, to attend a disciplinary hearing..."

"Thank you. Visitor, please take the badge and attach it to the front of your robes."

Draco made a face at *Draco Malfoy, Disciplinary Hearing*. At the look Harry gave him, he pinned it to his robe anyway. "When I visited the Ministry with my father, I never had to wear a *badge*. As if people don't look at me and already know perfectly well who I am- ow! Don't kick your moral support!"

"Thank you, I feel very supported," Harry said dryly.

"Visitor to the Ministry, you are required to submit to a search and present your wand for registration at the security desk, which is located at the far end of the Atrium."

Good thing Draco had left the dagger at home, though it had been up for internal debate. He'd gotten into the habit of carrying it everywhere. He was afraid someone would discover it in his absence and ask questions. But if Ron or Hermione went through his room, he would take that as free rein to start tampering with *their* possessions, and see how they liked the results...

The telephone box took them into the ground like a Muggle lift, the voice wishing them a pleasant day. Harry looked awed by the dark wood and blue ceiling of the Ministry, the Floo ports, and even the large fountain. "Stop gaping, it's embarrassing," Draco hissed in his ear. "Everyone will be staring at you, because you're Harry Potter. You don't want them to see you looking like some yokel tourist seeing the Bruixots de Sang in Barcelona for the first time, do you? Especially not for the Fountain of Magical Brethren. Ugh."

"Why?" Harry whispered back. The constant annoyance of Draco did seem to help distract him. "Magical brotherhood not your cup of tea?"

"Oh, hardly," Draco said, waving a dismissive hand towards the gold figures as they passed. "Look at the *craftsmanship*. The nepotism that went into the awarding of this commission... even the house elf's eyes are too small, and that's the most salient-"

"If I'm not expelled from Hogwarts, I'll put in ten Galleons," Harry said drearily, and Draco elbowed him discretely in the side.

"No! *When* you're not expelled, you will take those spare ten Galleons and use them to buy me the most expensive caffeinated drink on the premises, because it is too bloody early in the morning to deal with your unrealistically pessimistic yapping!"

A wizard called Eric pulled them aside to scan them with a golden rod, another indignity Draco had never experienced when visiting with Father. "Eleven inches, phoenix-feather core, been in use four years. That correct?"

"Yes," said Harry nervously, and Draco was suddenly more nervous. Depending on what that scale instrument actually was, he'd be lucky if *his* wand didn't turn the Ministry into a warzone months early.

"Ssh, it's okay," Draco whispered, pulling out the talon wand to stroke. "I'm not trying to give you away or replace you, you're the only wand for me. I just need you to sit with this nice man for a minute, and then we can be together again, okay?"

He fretted, while the slow guard stared at the scar and seemed to realize it was the Boy Who Lived he'd scanned. Mr. Weasley managed to forestall the fanboying. Eric gave Draco's necklace a suspicious glance, the glistening Antipodean Opaleye he had taken to wearing daily since it had proved his Patronus. But Eric seemed less interested in the talon wand, which neither burned the hand nor the weighing machine. The only thing out of the ordinary came when Eric read out the slip. "Twelve and three quarter inches, dragon heartstring core, been in use thirty-three years. That-" He looked up, saw a teenager, and faltered.

"It's been in the family a long time," Draco said, taking it back with his most innocent smile.

"Thank you, Eric," Mr. Weasley said, and herded Draco and Harry away. Harry had to deal with the predicted staring as they went through the gates into a lift. Everyone in the wizarding world wanted to know about Harry, and it made Harry so blatantly miserable, it was almost comical. He saw Harry trying to hide his scar beneath his bangs.

"Don't bother. They'll know who you are either way."

"Is that supposed to be comforting?" Harry glared. Draco made a face at him, puffing up and jerking his cheeks back and forth. Harry covered his mouth cracking up.

"And anyway, Harry," Draco said through his scrunched lips, "They're all staring at me as well, you know. Not because I'm a Malfoy..." He turned his lips normal again, and used his hands as a shelf to make his face a flower on display. "But because I'm so *devastatingly* good-looking."

"Right," Harry laughed, as they arrived at level three and everyone filed out. "That's why everyone's flooding for the exits."

"There's no accounting for taste," Draco said loftily. By the time they arrived at their floor, he had gotten Harry smiling. The smile fell off Harry's face, though, as the voice announced,

"Level Two, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, including the Improper Use of Magic Office, Auror Headquarters and Wizengamot Administration Services."

"This is us, boys," said Mr. Weasley. They headed into a corridor that Draco had gotten all too familiar with post-Azkaban. "My office is on the other side of the floor."

Harry stared with interest as they went through the Auror cubicles. Father had used to threaten Draco with signing him up to become an Auror if he was too badly-behaved. He hadn't been able to imagine anything more undignified than running around as a common member of *law enforcement*.

"Hardly Unspeakables, are they?" Draco whispered, then froze at the sight of a long ponytail he remembered from outside Grimmauld. Williamson, the name had been. Draco kept his head low as they passed. *This is why you need to start behaving more like Remus and less like Sirius. You already have too many enemies to go making any new ones.*

They arrived at Misuse of Muggle Artifacts, which could only be called a department in the same way a puddle could be called a body of water. It competed for prominence with the nearby broom closet, its brass plaque was shamefully tarnished, and could barely fit two desks inside. Mr. Weasley foffed about, showing off his bizarre Muggle collection. The other wizard misused enough to be assigned to the Misuse department was an old codger called Perkins, who rushed in to let Mr. Weasley know the time and place for the hearing had been changed.

The Wizengamot had moved the hearing an hour earlier. Draco remarked that this was good, that it was lucky to find out their little tricks before Sirius's trial, with a trial they knew was a sure thing. Harry looked at him like he'd have been better off taking Zacharias Smith, before he raced off, with Mr. Weasley telling Draco to stay put with Perkins, he'd be right back...

Except Perkins had exhausted himself rushing to give the news, and soon dozed serenely off in his chair. And Mr. Weasley was not right back. Draco could only assume he'd gotten held up talking to colleagues, many of whom Draco might have shot a blood-red tornado at last year. Keeping his head down should be a major item on his list for the year, which he planned to make after Sirius's trial and consultation with Severus about his OWLs. He never had seemed to stick to it in past years, but this year was comparatively simpler. After getting Sirius freed, he only had one overarching goal: not getting Sirius killed.

But surely there could be no harm in seeing about the plaque. He had a full knowledge of metal transfiguration to fix it, or at least change it to something less depressing. He had made Severus a silver nameplate for his office in second year that had looked better than that.

He inched out past the snoring Perkins. He could replace the plaque completely, with ease if he used silver, but it would take forever to hand-carve new... and he had to be careful with charms cleaning or transfiguring existing bronze, to ensure it wouldn't lose the lettering anyway...

"Pyritaverum. Aurulaquerum," Draco whispered, looking around, and cast Aurulaquerum a few more times. After turning bronze to the realest-looking fool's good he could, he cast a shine that should hold the plaque untarnished for decades. He had used the charm many times giving the shine he wanted to Harry's golden rose ring, which Draco had not seen since the

night of the Third Task. For all Draco knew, Harry had thrown it away... no, he should pay attention to delicate transfiguration...

Five times was all it took to have it gleaming. Draco was admiring the improvement, pleased with himself and the world, certain both Harry and Sirius's trials would yield nothing but good results. He felt himself thoroughly in the sunlight, before a face appeared on the gold behind his reflection.

He would have known the face without the voice, which he had last heard more recently than he had seen, calling out in panic as Harry Potter escaped. "My son was not exaggerating, was he? You *are* skilled at transfiguration."

It was lucky that Draco already had his wand out, because otherwise, he would have drawn it right in the face of Cantankerous Nott.

Nott had used to have a position in the Ministry, although Draco thought he would have retired by now. He should have known what or when, given the tentative friendship resumed last year with the man's son. But this was one of the negative side effects of self-absorption. He had to stand there pretending not to be in high alert at one of Voldemort's earliest and most devoted Death Eaters. Although not devoted enough to have gone to Azkaban the first time around.

"Mr. Nott." Draco went into his mind, for the last-ditch resort where he stopped being himself and began role-playing the situation as 'myself as Severus Snape.' Severus was on top of every situation, and if he was in the wrong about anything, he would never let you know he knew it. "What an unexpected pleasure. I hope Theo is well."

Meaning, *We haven't been writing each other letters, let alone visiting, I'll remind you, so any taint I have on me doesn't need to rub off on him.*

"Oh, more than well," Nott said, with overt paternal pride Draco remembered envying in the blue loop. "He's been working hard this summer, and not just with his nose stuck in his books." Draco had often thought it was stooped old Nott's fault that Theo was so quiet, with their sepulchral home life. The widowed Mr. Nott was a generation older than Father, with no attempts made to replace his deceased wife or give Theo siblings. It was ironic that Nott would lament Theo's bookishness, when he had been the one to give Theo little to do growing up but sit alone and read.

But now he had set his son another task. "He's been practicing his flying all the time for Quidditch, you know. I'm sure you've been as well," Nott said, with a warmth that seemed to confirm Severus's reading of the Death Eaters, wanting to pull Draco back into the fold. Punishment might come later, when he was too firmly ensnared again to run from it.

"Yes, of course," Draco lied, for whom life as a shutaway at Grimmauld had permitted no such thing. "Theo was always good at Chaser when we used to play in your garden-"

"I'm sure you'll have that in mind when you're choosing your squad for the year," Nott enthused, a grandfatherly twinkle in benign-looking Death Eater eyes. "Theo may not have

played at school before, but he's been working hard to get up to speed. With my encouragement, of course. I do hope you'll give him a chance," he said, and winked.

"Theo is trying out?" Draco frowned, at what sounded very unlike the Theo he knew. "And, er, yes, Mr. Nott, I'll put in a good word for him with the new captain, but..."

"No need to be coy." Nott leaned in to say more conspiratorially, "We all know your godfather is giving you the position. It was requested for you from high up. *Very* high up. See, Draco, there are *advantages* to having the friends we do... but I don't need to tell you that."

"No. No, you don't."

"Draco?" Mr. Weasley had walked up, and was giving Nott a troubled look. "I told you to wait in the office."

Nott's demeanor changed from chumminess to dignified contempt. "I am sure, Draco," Nott said coolly, "We will be speaking to each other soon," and straightened his stooped back and strode away rather than speak a word to Mr. Weasley.

"Are you alright?" Mr. Weasley called, pulling him into the office. "I'm sorry, I got held up, had to invite Kingsley to dinner, Molly's making meatballs, hers are his favorite-" He glanced over at Perkins, but the man was snoring so loud they could barely hear each other. "What did Nott want? He was one of the men in the graveyard, wasn't he? Did he try to hurt you?"

"No." Draco confined himself to that, rather than adding words that would make it sound like he'd gone stark raving mad: *He wanted to tell me I'm Slytherin Quidditch captain.*

It was an anxious wait, making Draco wish he'd pressed for trial access. As much as Draco knew it would be fine, he could only use up so much time in borrowing parchment and drafting an owl to Severus, asking if it was true he would be made Quidditch captain, and if so, why Cantankerous Nott had known before Draco. Afterwards, watching the clock pass this slowly was hardly an ideal occupation- especially as a sitting duck, where Nott could go and tell any of his friends he liked that Draco Malfoy was there.

At least Draco had made the plaque look nicer.

Mr. Weasley hadn't noticed the improvement, in his rush to get Draco out of the way of any other wandering Death Eaters. But Harry did.

"Mr. Weasley, did you get your nameplate replaced during my trial?"

"Harry!" Mr. Weasley exclaimed, leaping to his feet. "Oh, Harry, the verdict-"

Harry's face broke into partial relief. "Cleared," he said, "Of all charges," and Mr. Weasley beamed at him with the most paternal pride imaginable.

"Of course!" Mr. Weasley enthused. His excitement was dented when his following remark, "With Dumbledore defending you, how could you not be," was met with even more drawn

tiredness on Harry's face. "Oh, Harry, you must be exhausted. We should get you boys home..."

"I told you," Draco drawled into Harry's ear as they departed. "You're lucky we didn't bet on it. I'd have had you in a Slytherin uniform on the *first* day of term... oh, yes, I transfigured the plaque while I waited. *Some* of us have more productive things to do with our time than show trials. Why the long face? Waylaid by Rita Skeeter or something?"

But it seemed not attention he had gotten to be troubling Harry, but attention he hadn't. Dumbledore had exerted himself admirably on Harry's behalf, getting the charges dismissed, but the minute they were, he had swept out without a word. Overall, Draco got the impression that Dumbledore had been so cold to Harry throughout, it had left Harry feeling a real criminal.

"You didn't do anything wrong," Draco hissed. "If Dumbledore couldn't stay, it's because he had to go work on Sirius's defense. You're overthinking it. You haven't magically stopped being the Chosen One, just because a few bureaucrats decided that you ought to have let your soul feed the poor needy Dementors-"

But Mr. Weasley had stopped walking, and taken Harry's arm to stop him as well. Standing just before them was the Minister of Magic, talking to-

Father noticed Harry first, sneer turning an already cold face glacial. "Well, well, well... Patronus Potter," he drawled, only to falter at the sight of his son behind the Boy Who Lived and his least favorite Weasley. It might have been pain in Father's eyes, before they regained their impenetrable hauteur. "And my... fascinating son. The Minister was just telling me that you were here. Your wand was registered entering. Well... not *your* wand. One *should* clarify..."

"Minister Fudge," Draco interrupted brightly, "What a lovely *new* pocket watch you have."

"Oh, yes. I, er, I had been wondering, my boy, about the prospect of purchasing my old watch back from you, as it were, should it still be in mint condition..."

"Oh, I'm afraid I've already given it as a present, sir, but I appreciate the offer. Not that I need the money."

"A present?"

"Oh, yes," Draco said lazily, "To a most worthy recipient," and Father was annoyed enough to return to his Potter-baiting.

"The Minister was just telling me about your lucky escape, Potter. Quite astonishing, the way you continue to wriggle out of very tight holes... snakelike, in fact."

"Yeah," Harry said defiantly, "Yeah, I'm good at escaping," and Draco didn't know how Dumbledore could given Harry the cold shoulder. It was all he could do not to take Harry's face and kiss him right there for his temerity.

"And," Draco put in, with deliberate, brutal suggestiveness for his father's benefit, "Harry has a way with serpents. In my experience."

A speechless horror flitted through Father's icy eyes. "What are you doing here, anyway?" Harry asked Father, and Merlin, he wasn't afraid of anything, was he?

Except, it had seemed, being ignored by one of his paternal substitutes.

"Private matters between myself and the Minister are hardly any concern of yours-" Father began. But Draco's resolution to keep his head down this year didn't even last until he got around to writing it down.

"Are they a concern of your only son and heir?" Draco bit out. "I do find myself curious..."

"Lucius, we do have matters to discuss. Shall we go up to my office?" Fudge inserted himself quickly. Matters in this case clearly were of the gold-colored variety. Charity, under-the-counter campaign contributions, outright bribery, you name it, it would happen in that office.

"Draco," Harry said, touching his arm. Draco realized he had stood there watching his father leave, instead of following Harry and Mr. Weasley. His legs hadn't known for sure, even still, whom it was they were meant to follow.

Preparation for the Sirius's trial necessitated more frequent visits from Dumbledore. It was not only the first criminal, solemn, or full court trial Sirius had been given, but the first trial at all.

It was even odds whether the prosecution would even try to press charges over Wormtail. The Ministry would produce eyewitnesses from the initial attack, but given the coroner's report about Wormtail's body, they might attempt to cut their losses and only indict Sirius formally for the death of twelve Muggles. Remus, though, thought that Fudge would lead the case himself, and accuse Sirius, in front of all the world, of *all* of the crimes he had been imprisoned for. The man was a coward, but he was too proud not to.

The charges of escaping Azkaban would probably be let off with a fine, should the rest be proved false. If anything, the Ministry would be leaving themselves open to a whopping counter-lawsuit for unlawful imprisonment. But it was clear what was really at stake, at least for Fudge: a massive hit in reputation, a corresponding victory for Dumbledore, and the full return of a rich, powerful ally from a famous old family to Dumbledore's side. Most of all, there was the question of the circumstances of Pettigrew's death, which Fudge still denied had anything to do with the Dark Lord.

Massive press coverage was anticipated. Without an underage defendant, the press would be allowed inside, although theoretically kept under restraint. Once again, Harry would be there in court, this time as a witness for the defense. Meanwhile, Fudge would be calling the coroner who had analyzed the body of Pettigrew, Hit Wizards from the squad that arrested Sirius, Sirius himself, and, distressingly enough, Remus.

Fudge had also entered a lengthy list of old schoolmates, experts, and tangentially related wizards, presumably as consultants or character witnesses. Only Dumbledore would call the remaining witnesses: Pansy Parkinson, Millicent Bulstrode, Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, Ron Weasley, Luna Lovegood, Draco Malfoy, and Severus Snape. With these, Dumbledore meant to establish the guilt of Wormtail for the death of the Muggles, to the extent that this alternative culprit put any firm belief in Sirius's guilt beyond reasonable doubt. The work of the rat thieves in third year might just turn out more useful than they ever dreamed.

Draco had received anxious letters from the Slytherin girls, and assured them they would just have to answer straightforward factual questions about catching the Weasley family rat, establishing a chain of custody of sorts. Nothing to besmirch their names, or upset their parents' friends. He promised to meet with them and bring Dumbledore with him. And Dumbledore proved far more amenable to the prospect of hanging out with Slytherins than Harry Potter.

The night before the trial, though, Dumbledore sat everyone down who had been there the night Scabbers was unmasked, including Severus, whose involvement would be excused to Voldemort as "keeping up his cover". The Order meeting room was an odd setting, but it fit them all. Dumbledore sat at the head of the table, with Sirius and Remus on either side, and the students close by, with a strained but anticipating air like planning some heist. Except they were, as it happened, the ones on the side of truth and justice. Especially Luna, who arrived by Floo and was escorted by one of the twins. Draco confined himself to a quick hug and whisper of "Bloody hell Luna it's you my favorite cousin I missed you so much *wah* Luna it's Luna" before he pulled her beside him, holding her hand on top of the table.

Mrs. Weasley left them all hot cocoa, whose marshmallows floated over the surface of the steaming liquid thanks to an enchantment by Luna, travelling right to the tongue and melting there directly when drank. Dumbledore begged Luna to teach him the spell later, before opening one of a great many sets of folders he carried, spectacles going on. His directive was to stick to the facts as much as possible, to avoid inconsistencies. The greatest strength of their incredible story was that so many of them shared it.

Dumbledore offered to leave out Severus's part, but Severus was annoyed by the attempt to spare him. "It is no secret, my hatred for Black," Severus said impatiently, "And the public record of my attempt to have him killed will gain me much credit where it is needed." With the Dark Lord, he meant. Draco wondered how much credit he had gained by promising to make their would-be junior Death Eater Draco the Quidditch captain. "We lie about nothing. If I am to be the villain of the piece, well, I am not ill-suited for the role."

"He is *so cool*," Draco whispered to Luna.

"I never thought you would agree to do this," Sirius said uncomfortably, staring at Severus like he suspected a trap. "After... after everything, I can't believe you'd speak at my trial."

Severus ignored this poor show of gratitude, but Draco prodded as well. "Severus, do I need to tell you what I'll do if you back out or undermine-"

"No, Draco," Severus said dryly. "Removed entrails, desecrated corpses, the lot."

Ron muttered something to Luna behind Draco that sounded suspiciously like, "*Slytherins.*"

They ran over the story at great length, omitting just that one pesky detail of Draco wanting to kill Wormtail and Harry stopping him. It was extraneous in the grand scheme of things, with the main focus on that small confession Wormtail had made: *I had to kill those Muggles, or no one would have believed I was dead and Sirius had done it, not for sure. They were just Muggles.* Between the seven people who had been there to hear, they managed to piece together every word. Dumbledore told them not to repeat it word-for-word, though, but recall the general sentiment.

None of them could sleep nearly at all the night before, none the least Harry, who had once again been given the cold shoulder by Dumbledore at the meeting's close. Draco remembered Halloween in third year, and suggested a sleepover, but Remus put a stop to the idea. He did agree to let Draco have his favorite cousin stay in his room, conjuring her a bed. Draco marched Luna up the stairs after the grand tour. She was a big fan of Draco's color scheme, and declared the room one great hovering moonstone at the apex of the house, a building with its own built-in Patronus. "Well," Draco laughed, "I *have* been told I'm the opposite of a Dementor."

They stayed up later than they should have catching up. Luna seemed sad to have been left out of it all, but the prospect of clearing Sirius's name the way the three of them had vowed had her in high spirits. She, for one, didn't seem to think failure an option. Draco, always unduly nervous about events unique to the red line, was not so sanguine. But he feigned it, and made her laugh so hard, they were both clutching their stomachs before they went to bed.

They were woken by an anxious Harry, who began a tale of woe. Soon, he noticed Luna's presence and clammed up. "Oh, don't mind me," said Luna sleepily, "I think it's quite sweet, you coming to Draco when you have nightmares."

Harry might never have fled a room more quickly. Draco didn't have time to check in with him the next morning, though. He had to go to the Ministry and check in with the witnesses who started their whole tale. It was worth it to go up to the coffee stand and see a badge that matched his on a nearby table: *Pansy Parkinson, Sirius Black Trial, Witness for the Defense.*

"You should hold onto those after the trial," Draco told them. Millie looked up, already wearing hers, and gave a nervous smile. "They could end up being valuable."

"Why," Millie said wanly. "Souvenirs of witnessing your uncle getting the Dementor's Kiss?"

Draco chose to ignore that. "You probably won't be called today. But you'll still have to sit in court. Sorry about that. It'll probably be interesting. I'm going to get a coconut latte..."

"With extra toasted coconut flakes?" Pansy offered, along with a lovely chocolate and almond croissant waiting beside it. Millie rolled her eyes and began to grill Draco about what *exactly* they would have to say. Still, she was there, and she had brought Mr. Wilberforth's carrying case. They finished their coffees and went off to meet with Dumbledore outside the courtroom, handing the case over.

"I will get it back, though, won't I?" Millie said, grimacing. "I don't like the idea of trying to get Mr. Wilberforth back to Hogwarts without it. He'd probably claw some Hufflepuff to death before we even left the platform."

"We must not have that," Dumbledore said with a twinkle in his eyes, and solemnly vowed that the estimable Mr. Wilberforth would have his caravan returned in ample time.

The students took their seats alongside Remus and Severus, in the section for witnesses for the Defense, back to the side from where the chair covered in chains awaited Sirius. Draco remembered this courtroom all too well. It was where Draco and Mother's trials had been held, where Harry had been a witness for the defense for both. Quite an advocate for the Black family, the Boy Who Lived.

It was a struggle to find a seat without thinking that *Draco* was meant to be sat at the center in chains. He saw both Remus and Severus glancing uneasily at that chair as well.

The courtroom was a cavernous dungeon of a room, its insufficiently torch-lit confines like a place carved out of the depths of the earth. Draco had known Harry was going to testify in his trial, but unlike in Mother's case, he hadn't thought it would be enough. Drained of so much hope by the Dementors, he'd almost resented the interruption to the predictability of his regularly scheduled soul-draining, certain he would be returned there summarily until the end of his days. But like so many times, he had underestimated Harry. He hoped Fudge would be making the same mistake.

They were not the first in the courtroom, arriving just after nine, to a trial due to start at 10:30. There were Wizengamot and the press before them. Rita Skeeter was at the front of the press section, a new Quick-Quotes Quill in her lap already scribbling frantically, the bright mauve of her robes a dismaying clash with the plum-purple robes of the Wizengamot whispering nearby. Their glances all went judgingly to Dumbledore, and after to Harry, though a few elderly witches and wizards came over and greeted Dumbledore with more friendliness. More did as the courtroom filled, though many of the Wizengamot seemed to eye their party with a wary, standoffish air, following the example of the Minister of Magic.

Fudge arrived just before 10:30, to his seat front and center as an interrogator. He was soon sat between one grim-faced, monocle-wearing witch that Draco recognized from his own trial, and one who was smiling harmlessly around like a proper lady, in robes with accenting pink jewelry. She was instantly recognizable from years before his trial, as a woman he had once served in an Inquisitorial Squad. She looked calmly ready to lead an inquisition now, as if the trial of just about the most notorious criminal in wizarding history- that was, one not called Grindelwald or Voldemort- was no more contentious a matter than serving afternoon tea.

Draco had shared more than one of those with her, in nauseating attempts to suck up to her in fifth year during the blue loop. The sight of her sent the nauseating sickly-sweet cough syrup taste of the rose syrup she put in his tea into the backs of his nostrils. *Remember, don't draw more attention to yourself than necessary, especially with her. Ideally, by the time you're both at Hogwarts, she should have forgotten who you even are. You don't need any more bloody enemies...*

At precisely 10:30 a.m. on August 16, 1995, flanked by Aurors on every side, Sirius Black was led into Courtroom Ten, his hands cuffed before him. At the Order's advice, he had straightened and pulled back his naturally wavy, Aunt Bella-like dark brown hair, and even shaved off all his facial hair, trimmed and controlled as it was. "Remus likes it," he had protested, but to no avail. Tonks had jinxed it away in one go, before she was relieved hurriedly of her duties when the time came to choose his robes.

Draco had insisted on being the one consulted then. He had put together an understated but chic collection of ensembles, a whole week's worth if necessary. All were in varying shades of not black but gold and red, shoving the Gryffindor affiliation in everyone's face. For today, Sirius wore flowing robes of a striking crimson, not blood-red but the bright honest red of Gryffindor Quidditch robes. The lapels of the robes and then the edges and sleeves had an even less subtle design of lion heraldry that Draco had transfigured onto them himself, before shining and re-shining up to this morning with his Aurulaquerum charm. They were set off by a shirt, vest, and trousers in shades of dark bronze.

Taken all together, Sirius could not have looked handsomer if he tried. The photographers for the papers outside must have loved him, with that swaggering, arrogant Black stride. But Draco was most proud of the finishing touch: hung prominently from those crimson robes, glinting in the torchlight, was the unmistakable sight of Cornelius Fudge's pocket watch.

Percy Weasley, coming up to take his place near Fudge's side, did a double and then a triple-take at the watch. So did a number of the press and the Wizengamot, recognizing the custom piece that Fudge had worn daily for years. Fudge himself nearly lost his balance in front of everyone from jumping so angrily to his feet. But he could only stand there impotently, at the spectacle of the prisoner he wanted to condemn, flaunting his own trademark at him.

Okay, so maybe Draco was making a realer enemy of the Minister of Magic. But if it threw him off his game in the trial, that was well worth it. Many times since Draco had fallen through that mirror, he had questioned what he was there for, what he was meant to do to justify this second chance. He had thought when he met Sirius that winning him his freedom was that second chance for both of them, only for Wormtail's escape to send it up in smoke. But now the dragon had finally breathed his fire, the rat had been swallowed, and it was time for the Grim to rise.

Once Sirius took a seat and the chains encircled him, the tumult faded to a dull murmur, then dropped away once Fudge began to speak, voice magically amplified. "Solemn trial of the sixteenth of August," Fudge began, "For thirteen counts of murder, unlawful escape from the prison of Azkaban, and for aiding and abetting the murders of James and Lily Potter."

Yeah, that last one had been *incredibly* intelligent for Fudge to sneak in, with their son a witness for the defense. Except maybe Fudge saw this as his chance to discredit Harry entirely, once and for all.

"Interrogators: Cornelius Oswald Fudge, Minister for Magic; Amelia Susan Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement; Dolores Jane Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister. Court Scribe, Percival Ignatius Weasley." He waited, and Dumbledore rose to his feet.

"Witness for the defense, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore," Dumbledore said, and rose from his chair as the barrister. Beside him, even under all those chains, Draco could still see Sirius fighting to hold back a wry smile at all the middle names, especially *Brian.*

"Very well," Fudge said, not even bothering to hide his distaste for Dumbledore. He picked up a paper and read, "The charges against the accused are as follows: thirteen counts of premeditated murder in the first degree, against the Muggles Troy Macdonald, Ralph Slater, Lucy Clarke, Emily Cole, Daniel Jackson, Amy Atkinson, Summer Palmer, Taylor Hunt, Ryan Fraser..." Wow, he had memorized all the Muggles' names. Fudge must really want to put Sirius away for them.

"...Mason Williams, Michael Ward, and Kieran Holmes, and of Peter Pettigrew, a wizard. Committed by the Blasting Curse, with the incantation Confringo, by the wand of the defendant, fourteen inches, walnut, dragon heartstring core, in use for twenty-four years." Shacklebolt, who had helped escort Sirius, formally laid out the wand on the table in front of Dumbledore, presenting it to the Wizengamot. "The accused is also charged with one count of illicitly absconding from a lawfully bestowed prison sentence..." The corner of Sirius's mouth smirked up at that. "And three counts of conspiracy to commit murder, aiding and abetting the attempted murder of James Potter, Lily Potter, and Harry Potter, and the completed murder of James Potter and Lily Potter. How does the accused plead to these charges?"

Sirius lifted his head, as defiant and proud a prisoner as Draco had been a guilty and cringing one in that very chair, and spoke loudly and clearly for every ear in the courtroom, "Not guilty."

And so the trial of the Prisoner of Azkaban began.

The Trial of the Century

Chapter Notes

Playlist

For an event called the trial of the century in every wizarding paper down to the Quibbler, the first few days were mostly anticlimactic. Fudge brought forward his array of experts to testify about the radius of the blast and the magical power involved, the arresting Hit Wizards- none of whom had witnessed the crime- and character witnesses, who had only slightly known Sirius or not at all. All of the Muggle witnesses had been Obliviated long ago, and so Fudge made do with character assassination instead. Some of the character witnesses had just known Aunt Bella, and went on about her as if she and Sirius were the same person.

From the looks that would flit across Severus's face during the character testimonies, Severus himself would happily have come forward and given a far more detailed and damning indictment of Sirius's moral fiber, if only someone would have asked him. But no one did, with the only interest in the progression of witnesses the rumor that Narcissa Malfoy would be coming by to give a family perspective on her disgraced cousin. But she never materialized, either because she didn't want to give evidence against her son's side, or Father didn't want to show his hand too blatantly.

The most interesting thing on the first day was the summoning of a coroner, a humorless-looking salt-and-pepper-haired mediwizard from St. Mungo's called only Bluthers, who had been the one to examine Pettigrew's corpse and declare him dead, as if that had been in any dispute. He affirmed in no uncertain terms that the deceased was indeed Peter Pettigrew. That was all the prosecution wanted to ask, as if producing a corpse was proof that Sirius had been the one to kill it. Umbridge made persnickety noises when Dumbledore rose to question Bluthers as well, but Bones let him, much to her distaste.

"Mr. Bluthers," Dumbledore said, with the same ease as if he was in his office dispensing root beer candy floss. "What did you determine as the cause of death?"

"An Unforgivable curse," Bluthers said flatly. "The Killing curse. Avada Kedavra."

"Not a Blasting curse?"

"Not in the slightest."

"And when was this Killing curse performed?"

"When the body was brought to me from Hogwarts. Early morning, June 26th, 1995."

Murmurs were sent through the courtroom. Any dozing old Wizengamot members were being shaken awake by their compatriots. The press sat up and began jotting down notes excitedly, with Rita Skeeter's Quick-Quotes quill a blur at her side. Everyone knew what that date meant, but Dumbledore spelled it out.

"So it was not November 3, 1981, as originally reported throughout the wizarding world."

"No," said Bluthers, looking rather bored by his role in proceedings. It seemed that if it was all the same to everyone else, he would have preferred the company of cadavers.

"It is thus impossible for Peter Pettigrew to have been murdered in 1981."

"Given that he was killed this year," Bluthers grunted, "Pretty difficult, yeah."

"Were you able to determine anything about the curse that killed him?"

Bluthers looked to have an unhealthy relish in his dark eyes as he reported, "It was a strong curse. Cast by a very powerful wizard. Very dark. It was fast-acting. Stopped his heart in an instant."

Everyone in that courtroom knew Harry had claimed it was Voldemort to have cast that curse. It was convenient that to this extent, Draco's description and that of the genocidal snake-face corresponded.

Ron struggled to hold back a laugh, giving Draco a smirk behind his hand. "A very powerful dark wizard," he whispered. Draco held up his hand and stuck his tongue at him behind it, before Remus gave them a look and they were serious again.

"And what about the condition of the body? Did you find anything unusual?"

"Missing a hand," Bluthers grunted. "Had a silver one. Just attached. The hand was severed at the wrist not long before the wizard was killed." That matched exactly with Harry's description of the resurrection ritual, to anyone who'd heard it. "The other arm had the Dark Mark on it."

"Mr. Bluthers," Umbridge said, rising with alarm. "Are you certain it was the Dark Mark?"

"Seen enough bodies with the Dark Mark on them to know it," Bluthers said, eyeing her like he thought her the greatest imbecile he had ever encountered, and he passed his time with corpses.

"Could this Mark have been recently applied?" she asked, but it sounded to everyone's ears like what it was: grasping at straws.

"No," Bluthers said, showing his first sign of real emotion, as a flicker went through his eyes of gratification to foil Umbridge. "I can date those, see. Dark magic that powerful, there's an easy enough spell for it, see. Carnediem." Draco mentally stored away the name, and made a note to see if it would work on the brand on Sirius's hand. Well, assuming Sirius wasn't dragged off and Kissed before Draco got the chance. "Can date it to the month. The mark was 15 years and 5 months old."

That drew an even louder set of whispers. Sirius was halfway exculpated already.

"Were there any other anomalies you found?"

"Yeah," Bluthers said, looking satisfied by the chance to show off his expertise. "Some might miss this, but me, never. See, there's more unregistered Animagi running about than you'd think."

The papers the first day were all about Bluthers's testimony, although the photo on the cover was Sirius striding into the courtroom like a conquering hero in red and gold. Even Rita Skeeter's article was not without reference to "the stunning transformation of the savage Prisoner of Azkaban, now Bachelor of Azkaban. If acquitted, the ladies might be the ones looking to lock him down!"

Any hopes formed by breathless reporting on Sirius's looks were dashed the next day, when Remus's testimony proved a controversial highlight. Remus had been unhappy to be called by the prosecution, to say the least, but he and Dumbledore had prepared. They'd assumed it would be establishing his belief that Sirius had been Secret Keeper, and his continued conviction of Sirius's guilt until recently, and they'd assumed correctly.

Draco had reason to be doubly grateful of his own determination not to let Severus expose Remus as Moony this time around. Remus would have been treated very differently in court as a werewolf. And before Draco had gotten to know him, he knew, he would have seen little wrong with that.

Draco, Sirius, and Luna had all taken extra care fussing over Remus that morning, who looked more polished than his Hogwarts days. Remus had been notoriously reluctant to let Sirius spend his piles of Black gold on him, despite the shabbiness of his appearance and possessions, but the trial had been occasion enough for him to give in. He looked like a different person in the docket that day, clean-cut and clean-shaven in crisp hand-tailored burgundy robes that set off the light brown of his hair and the deeper, soulful hue of his hazel eyes. The prosecution took care to introduce him as a former Hogwarts professor, and leave out the fact he was currently unemployed. It was a dangerous game they were playing, though. Remus couldn't have been any more of an adverse witness.

"Were you privy to the decision to make Sirius Black the Secret Keeper for the Potters?"

"Yes, I was present throughout the process," Remus answered patiently. Fudge leaned forward as if he had smelled blood, though *whose* blood was the more pertinent question. Draco had almost never met a person better at being underestimated than Remus Lupin.

"And would you consider yourself to have been a close friend of the Potters?"

"Yes. Sirius, Peter, and I were the closest friends that James Potter had," Remus said, and the calm composure remained on his face when he spoke the word Peter. But Draco knew him well enough to know the disgust that still lingered in him to even say that common name.

"Would it not then have been ordinary for you to be notified, should they have chosen to change their Secret Keeper?"

"Yes, ordinarily," Remus said, holding back from argument. He was too disciplined for that. Argument would come in the cross-examination, Draco knew. He had the feeling that own side had planned this better than Fudge's. Disappointing on the Ministry's end. The Order were the ones trying to prepare for war at the same time.

"When you heard the Potters had been attacked, who did you believe responsible?"

"Sirius Black," Remus said evenly, "As I still believed him to have been the Secret Keeper."

"Were you aware that Peter Pettigrew was an unregistered Animagus before the murders?"

"Yes, I was."

"Whom did you believe responsible for the murder of Peter Pettigrew and the twelve Muggles?"

"Sirius Black," Remus said in the same tone.

"You were a close friend of Peter Pettigrew at school. He was a poor performer academically," Fudge went on, looking pleased with himself. "Would you have believed *him* capable of a Blasting curse powerful enough to kill twelve people at once?"

"Yes," Remus said, clearly not the answer Fudge expected. "If a man is capable of becoming an Animagus, he is capable of magic at least that powerful."

There were glances exchanged by Wizengamot members behind Fudge, but he rallied. "But you are the person who knew Black, Pettigrew, and the Potters best. And you *did* believe that Black was guilty, and Pettigrew his victim."

"Yes," Remus said, and Fudge handed him over to Dumbledore, who had a simple question.

"Do you still believe Sirius Black is guilty of these murders?"

"No," Remus said in that unimpeachable schoolteacher manner of his, and now the surprise was the courtroom's, if not the prosecutors'. It must be hard for the audience to understand why the prosecution had called Remus. "No, I *know* he is not the murderer."

"How do you know this?" Dumbledore gently prompted.

"Because," Remus said calmly, "I saw Peter Pettigrew with my own eyes last year, alive, and heard him confess to the murders of the twelve Muggles, to being the Secret Keeper, and to the betrayal of James and Lily to the Dark Lord."

It took at least two minutes for order to be restored in the court. Remus and Sirius had exchanged a covert glance during that stretch of alarm and ferment, Sirius's eyes making it clear how much he appreciated not just the job Remus was doing on the stand, but the figure

he cut up there doing it. Draco hoped his eyes were some of the few to have caught it, but Umbridge hadn't needed to. She had already had her ammunition readied for them.

"Redirect," she said, rising to her feet and approaching the witness before Bones could protest. "Mr. Lupin, how would you describe your relationship to the defendant?"

The Order had come to the decision that there was no point in trying to hide what half of Hogwarts had suspected by the time the pair graduated. So Remus looked her pleasantly in the eye, as if he was discussing the Defense curriculum with his impending successor, not proclaiming his entanglement with a convicted mass murderer, and answered, "We are partners. We are in love."

That got nearly as shocked and titillated a reaction as Remus's claim he had seen Peter alive, unfortunately. As a nation, Magical Britain could be so laughably backward when it came to social politics. Umbridge had a look like curdled milk distorting her face after the admission, but she plastered back on that sickly-sweet fake smile and trilled, "Oh, my! Were you in love back then, too? When he was arrested for having your best friends killed?"

Remus looked back at Sirius, and even if Sirius was to lose, at least Draco had given Sirius this moment. Sirius had once said he could die happy as long as Remus believed in him. And there was no ever questioning it ever again, as Remus raised his chin before the whole court, and said, "Yes. Since the day I met him, Sirius has been my entire life."

Draco felt his heart constrict. He looked down at his hands, unable to process the passion in that usually controlled voice, the story that told of undying devotion, even in the face of what had seemed undeniable betrayal. He took a deep breath, uncomfortable with how much it felt these two men meant to him at that moment, men whose deaths had sounded like good but inconsequential news in the blue loop. If he hadn't fallen into the mirror, both of these men would be dead.

He looked up, and his gaze instinctively sought Harry, who was staring at him intently, though Draco had no idea why. When he caught his gaze, Harry looked away.

"Oh, my, my," Umbridge trilled again, discomfited by the expression of strong attachment between two men and doing a poor job of hiding it. "And yet when you heard of the tragic events that befell your friends, even you believed Sirius was guilty, the man you... loved."

"Yes," Remus said steadily, "I did. It is the greatest shame of my life to have been so wrong."

Umbridge tittered nervously, but Draco hoped few others could be untouched by the quiet dignity of the man before them, so raw and honest, and yet still so straight-backed and clear-eyed at the center of a hurricane, with a calm no evil could shake.

"Is *that* your greatest shame?" she said with a queasy smile, before regaining her self-control. "You say you changed your mind because you saw Pettigrew. Yet it should not escape anyone's notice that there have been *other* factors in play to alter your opinion. Is it not true, Mr. Lupin, that you have resumed your romantic relationship with the fugitive from justice, Sirius Black?"

"Yes," Remus said, folding his hands before him serenely, "I am proud to say I have."

There was some nervous laughter at that, though perhaps more out of tension than anything else. There was no laughter when Umbridge asked, the repulsion audible in her voice now, "And have you resumed your... physical relationship?"

"Yes," Remus said in the exact same tone, "I am proud to say I have."

Draco understood why Luna had been so eager to claim the right to call Remus her uncle.

Umbridge seemed at a loss, before Dumbledore rose to his feet and gently reminded the court, "Romance between men has not been a punishable crime in the laws of the Ministry of Magic since the nineteenth century. Sirius Black is on trial for murder, not for falling in love."

Oh, that last line *was* inspired. Tangential as it was, it would be in every paper that evening, rending a few sentimental hearts while it was at it. And so it was, though it had to share space with the main attraction of the proceedings: the testimony of the man Remus Lupin loved.

Sirius did admirably, keeping from losing his cool all but once. He patiently repeated his denials to Fudge and Umbridge's increasingly transparent insistences on the official narrative. *And so you told the Dark Lord where your friends were? No. And so you killed Peter Pettigrew? No. And so you killed the Muggles? No.* On and on it went, until they reached the question of why, if Sirius had been innocent, why he had not said so to the arresting officers, all of whom had already testified to finding him acting like a madman in the midst of the carnage.

"Do you deny you were found at the scene of the crime *laughing*?" Fudge asked severely.

"No, I don't deny it," Sirius said. Draco could hear from the creaking of the chains that his back had hunched, what looked to be under the weight of memory. "I was..." He stopped, voice choking up, and every ear in the court seemed to crane forward as one. "It wasn't *funny*. Nothing was funny. It was just that there was nothing to do *but* laugh. Because I had lost everything, and I knew no one would ever believe me. Peter had played it out too perfectly. I hadn't even told *Remus* that Peter was the Secret Keeper, because Peter had me doubting Remus as the spy. Maybe that part *was* funny. I couldn't believe old Wormtail had gotten one over on me, over all of us, that damned good."

"Why would you have said nothing in your defense?" Fudge asked, looking unmoved, and Draco realized, *Bloody hell, he really* does *believe Sirius is guilty, doesn't he?*

"I knew no one would listen," Sirius said, shaking his head. "Or that's what I thought. I was so young and stupid back then. And a part of me felt like I deserved whatever came to me. That it was my fault, for insisting James and Lily change the Secret Keeper to Peter. If I had never made them change it, they would still be alive, and Harry would still have parents. I'll never forgive myself for that. They would have been such good parents..."

Harry let out a choking noise. Draco reached out under the bench and grabbed Harry's hand. Harry's eyes shot up to his, as startled and alien as if Draco's touch had wrenched him back

from another world. If they had been alone, Draco would have wanted to kiss that hand.

"Then why did you hand them over to the Dark Lord?" Fudge asked, and Sirius snapped. The wistful, haunted look in his eyes changed in a split second to soul-rending fury.

"I DIDN'T HAND THEM OVER!" he bellowed, lunging forward in his chains, and those famous shots of the Prisoner of Azkaban came to life again. "I WOULD HAVE DIED FIRST! I WOULD HAVE DIED!"

Sirius's scream echoed throughout Courtroom Ten, the civilized veneer over the proceedings dropping, as the depths of the anguish of Azkaban was let loose into the heart of the Ministry. It was like a Dementor appearing in their midst, but instead of pulling at the onlookers, it froze them. No one spoke in the entire room for quite some time, and the only sound was the frantic scratching of Rita Skeeter's Quick-Quotes Quill.

The long final day was taken up by the case by the defense, with a carefully chosen order of witnesses. Sirius was not one of them, left to model his chains in peace, a look that Draco had overheard Remus admitting, to Tonks the past night, that he found rather compelling.

Millie was first, presenting the cat case, and telling the story of finding Mr. Wilberforth chasing a rat in the Hogwarts grounds. Her narrative ended with Pansy stopping Mr. Wilberforth, calling it Weasley's rat, and carrying it off to give to Draco Malfoy in Mr. Wilberforth's case. Pansy echoed Millie's tale, with the additional step of giving it to Draco herself. And the prosecution didn't waste their time questioning these two put-together pureblood girls, with their details just setting the scene. The venom was saved for those who claimed to have witnessed Pettigrew's confession.

Draco was left for last. He might have been insulted, if he hadn't spent so much of the red line working to be considered a fearsome dark wizard. Really, he could only consider that decision by Dumbledore an example of successful branding in action. So he sat there a mess of nerves, one side smushed to Luna's and the other to Harry's, willing his friends to be as brilliant as he knew they could be, when the fate of a man as brilliant as his uncle Sirius hung in the balance.

"Please state your name for the record."

"Hermione Jean Granger."

"And you will be entering your fifth year at Hogwarts next year, correct?"

"Yes."

"You have completed four years of Hogwarts. In how many of those years have you been officially named as top of your year?"

"Four," Hermione said, failing to keep a note of pride from her voice. She had been groomed with Sleek-Eazy potion, magical make-up, and golden dress robes within an inch of her life,

but she still looked far more comfortable playing the role of intellect than ingénue.

Umbridge rose in a prickly flash of pink jewelry. "Objection. Relevance."

"Character witnesses have been brought in by the prosecution," Dumbledore argued patiently. "In great quantity. In that light, I believe it only fitting that the court should be given some idea of the character of the witnesses for the defense."

"Very well," Bones said brusquely, adjusting her monocle. "Carry on."

"Miss Granger," Dumbledore asked, "You are Muggleborn, correct?"

"Yes," Hermione said, without a hint of shame in her voice.

"What do your parents do?"

"They're dentists," she said, before explaining, "Muggle teeth doctors." Many of the Wizengamot looked to have needed the explanation. Draco was doubly grateful to Luna for having shrunken Hermione's buck teeth last year, to save that visible discrepancy from showing.

"What do you wish to do when you graduate from Hogwarts?" Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling as he asked, as if in grandfatherly conviction of Hermione's future success.

Even Draco was surprised by how sure Hermione sounded, as she told the entire court, "I want to become Minister of Magic."

There were some titters from the most amphibian of the plebeians scattered in their midst. Draco began to think about the mechanics of casting a wandless nonverbal Langlock.

"What inspired this ambition?"

Hermione had the sense not to outright say *house elves.* "The wizarding world isn't perfect. There's a lot of inequality and injustice. And I want to do what I can to change it."

"So you would say," Dumbledore went on, "That you are a person who believes very strongly in truth and justice, and the necessity to pursue them even at personal cost."

"Yes," Hermione said intently, conviction shining from her pretty brown eyes. She smiled when she saw Dumbledore reach under the defense's stand and produce Mr. Wilberforth's case.

"When did you first see this case?"

"Near the end of my third year. June 1993. At the end of exams," she added, which was her foremost measure for telling time, with or without a time-turner.

"Where did you see it?"

"In the dungeons," Hermione said, having agreed not to go into detail about it being Severus's chambers if they could help it. "Draco sent word he had found Scabbers."

"Scabbers is whom?"

"Ron's pet rat," Hermione said, and Percy Weasley nearly dropped his quill before stiffly resuming his work as court scribe. "He'd been in his family for years. So we all went down to see."

"Whom is *we*, Miss Granger?"

"Me, Ron, Harry, Luna, and Professor Lupin." Hermione paused, aware of the dramatic effect of her words, before adding, "And Sirius Black."

"Were you not afraid to come face to face with the fearsome Prisoner of Azkaban?" Dumbledore asked, a smile in his eyes for his brave pupil, and Hermione shook her head eagerly.

"No. I had already suspected he was innocent. He had come because we had found proof."

"What was this proof?"

"The rat in that case. Scabbers wasn't his real name. He was really an Animagus," she said, and this time, Percy dropped his quill entirely. "He was a wizard in hiding."

"And how did you learn this?"

"Professor Lupin took out the rat," Hermione said, "And used a spell on him to make him leave his Animagus form." Percy began to write again, but he was redder than his hair.

"And who was this man?"

"He answered to Peter Pettigrew, or Wormtail," Hermione said carefully. Dumbledore stepped nearer, peering at her to show his close attention.

"Peter Pettigrew, supposedly murdered many years ago," Dumbledore spelled out, much to Percy's visible chagrin, "Had been in hiding as the Weasley family rat?" Percy, after all, had been the owner before Ron. Hermione said yes, and Dumbledore asked, "Do you know why?"

"Yes," Hermione said, and put a disgusted look on Umbridge's face as she answered, "Because he had been the Secret Keeper who knew the location of the Potters, not Sirius Black."

"And how do you know this?"

"Because I heard him confess it. His old friends asked him why he had turned on James and Lily Potter, and he said it was because he had been scared, and it hadn't seemed like there was any point in trying to fight You-Know-Who back then."

In the questioning of Hermione, the whole tale was unfurled. It was an incredible one, but she had definitely been the right choice to first articulate it, bright-eyed, young, pretty, and well-spoken. What could have seemed outlandish and false sounded logical in her organized telling. The Wizengamot only gasped outright when she repeated Wormtail's words about the Muggles. "He told us all, 'I had to kill those Muggles, or no one would have believed I was dead and Sirius had done it, not for sure. They were just Muggles.'"

"Those were his exact words?" Dumbledore said, eyes narrowing.

"Yes," Hermione said, shuddering with real repulsion. "I'll never forget them. It made me think of my parents. They would have just been more Muggles for him to kill."

"And did you or anyone there prompt Pettigrew to give this information?"

"No. Sirius and Remus were questioning him about James and Lily Potter, and how he could have betrayed them. Not the Muggles he killed."

"Did he give a justification for it?" Dumbledore asked, and he looked as grave and condemning as the first time he had heard it, when she answered,

"That he had no choice. That he had to do it or You-Know-Who would have killed him."

Just like the first time Draco had heard those words, just like the first time he had spoken them himself on the Astronomy Tower, they gave him the taste of ashes in his mouth.

"How did Pettigrew escape?"

"Professor Snape showed up," Hermione said, with apology in her voice. "He thought Sirius was guilty. He wanted to catch him and protect us. Pettigrew turned back to a rat and escaped."

"Did you pursue Pettigrew?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Her answer made her sound heroic, but it did happen to be true. "There were Dementors coming after Sirius into the dungeons. I went to warn the Slytherin students."

"That will be all."

Umbridge rose from her chair, walking out to step up to Hermione in her witness chair with an unctuous faux-friendliness on her face. While she prowled forward, Fudge asked Hermione, "Did you bear any direct witness to any of the crimes under judgment?" and got a clear no. But none of Fudge's witnesses had either. And unlike them, Hermione had definitely witnessed something.

Not that Umbridge was about to let anyone there dwell on that. "Just a few questions, dear. Who would you say are your closest friends at Hogwarts?"

"Draco Malfoy, Ron Weasley, Luna Lovegood, and Harry Potter."

"Do you know the relationship of Sirius Black to Harry Potter?"

What a stupid question. But Hermione was patient as she answered, "He's his godfather."

"Do you think it would be nice for Harry to have a godfather?" Umbridge asked, in a tone like Hermione was a naive little first-year, and none too bright at that.

"Yes, but-" Hermione began, only to be cut off, the way Harry said he had constantly been at his own hearing.

"Who first told you to doubt the guilt of Sirius Black?" Umbridge said, in a sad tone like this poor little girl had been monstrously deceived.

"Draco Malfoy," Hermione said, with no shame in her voice. "My best friend."

"How long have you been friends?"

"Since the start of first year," Hermione answered proudly. Umbridge turned that on her.

"Such a long time," Umbridge simpered. "My, what a lovely bracelet that is on your wrist. So intricate and arcane. So... *expensive*. Tell me, Miss Granger, did you purchase that bracelet yourself, or was it a gift?" Hermione said, of course, a gift. Draco wondered if Umbridge tying it to Draco was a lucky guess, or if it had been informed by one of any of the many Gryffindors or Slytherins who'd heard about it in first-year Potions.

"A gift from whom, my dear girl?" Umbridge pressed.

"Draco. And it wasn't expensive," Hermione added before Umbridge could cut her off. "He made it for me. He transfigured it. It didn't cost-"

"Has Draco Malfoy ever given you any other... expensive presents?" Tickets to the Muggle World Cup probably qualified, but Hermione answered no. "Unusual, is it not, a friendship so close between a Muggleborn and a boy of an old pureblood family?"

"We're the two smartest in our year," Hermione said, some of her most exasperated know-it-all tone sneaking through. "It only makes *sense*."

Umbridge ignored her answer. "You must feel quite *indebted*, my dear, for a young man of such a distinguished name to have taken notice of you. To have given you such beautiful presents."

Hermione could catch her drift. "I don't feel indebted," she snapped, feeling at her bracelet defensively. "Friendship isn't an economic exchange-"

"Of course not," Umbridge said calmly, as if Hermione was the unreasonable person for getting upset. "So this is a *real* friendship... And you are *fond* of Draco? You call him your best friend. I would imagine you would do a great deal for him, wouldn't you?"

"Of course I would," Hermione said hotly, and Ron winced. Draco just shook his head.

"It could be worse, believe me," Draco whispered to the others. "Umbridge is as vicious as they come."

Luna whispered, "Who is she?"

Draco sighed. "No, the question is, *what* is she?"

"Would you lie for him?" Umbridge said, leading the witness shamelessly.

"Of course not," Hermione snapped crossly, in a tone that tended to mean Draco was about to be on the receiving end of a few shrieks of *Frankenstein*, before a historical telling-off. But Umbridge could just turn on her heel, smirk as if she'd had some great victory, and tell the court she had no more questions.

Ron was next. Dumbledore began by also asking him his name and Hogwarts year, who his parents were, what they did, and about his interests and ambitions, personalizing him to the onlookers. The contrast between Ron and Hermione's backgrounds was stark. But he came off as just as honest and straightforward as she had, especially telling the story of getting a hand-me-down rat, along with a hand-me-down everything else. He told the story of that night much the same as Hermione, the only difference that of perspective. Draco had to feel even more embarrassed for him, as they got to the part where Remus had revealed Pettigrew.

"And had you ever believed that your pet rat was anything but a simple animal?"

"No, sir. Not for a second," Ron said, and it would have been worth quite a price of admission, to watch the stages of emotional turmoil Percy Weasley was experiencing in the background. To a connoisseur of Percy-suffering like Draco was, this was a veritable buffet of the stuff.

"Did you witness anything to change your mind?"

"Yes," Ron said bravely, and threw out the story of his humiliation without a second thought. "Professor Lupin cast a spell on Scabbers and made him turn into his real self. It was crazy. He was this disgusting little man with a missing finger. Just like Scabbers's missing toe."

"It must have been a shock," Dumbledore said sympathetically. "How did it make you feel?"

"Grossed out!" Ron exclaimed, and Draco smiled with fondness at his usual expressiveness showing through. "This was my pet! I'd been letting him eat out of my hand! I would give him half of my chocolate frogs. And he turned out to be the traitor who got Harry's parents killed."

"How were you convinced of this fact?" Dumbledore asked, and Ron recited the same story as Hermione, though not producing the exact words. Eventually, Dumbledore dismissed him, and Umbridge came up, with a clear agenda, probably the same as with Hermione. Discredit him with her insinuations, namely by his ties to Harry and Draco, who both had family ties to Sirius to make them want him free.

She proceeded along those lines, although her focus leaned more on the bribery angle, asking about the wealth of Harry and Draco, before throwing out a wealth of pointed, intrusive questions about the Weasleys' poor standard of living in comparison.

Draco couldn't believe Ron kept his temper. He did look fuming as he sat back down, beet red all over. It must have taken everything in him not to snap back in defense of his family. Harry squeezed his shoulders, thanking him and telling him how good he'd done, and Draco gave him a covert high five under the bench.

Luna had been taken aside days before, coached within an inch of her life to make her seem credible, and it showed. She was in plain robes of a sedate blue, no kooky glasses or jewelry, her long mane of hair tamed back into a single smooth braid. She looked more like some Beauxbatons student trailing around after Delacour than herself. Her demeanor matched, answering Dumbledore's questions without unnecessary commentary or digression. When she recited the story of Pettigrew's confession a third time, it felt like a tipping point of a sort, as the sheer quantity of witnesses with the same story seemed to be building towards a more inevitable sense of credibility. She came off quite well, at least until Umbridge got her chance at her.

They had seen what Ron and Hermione had gone through, so that should have given Luna an idea what to expect, but Draco was on high alert. He was less worried about Luna than his own self control. If Umbridge was too nasty to Luna, he wasn't sure he could keep court decorum. Casting Langlock on one of the interrogators might count as prejudicing the judicial process.

So he hoped there would be nothing worse for Luna than the first two, but Umbridge seemed to have singled her out as a weak link. When Luna answered that like the others, she had learned of Sirius's innocence from Draco, Umbridge smirked in that prim unholy way and went in for the kill, asking her relationship to Draco. When Luna said they were cousins, Umbridge asked if they were first cousins, and Luna answered, "No, but he's my favorite cousin."

"Did you attend the Hogwarts Yule Ball with him?" Umbridge asked, as if schoolchildren's gossip was the hinge upon which turned the innocence or guilt of the country's most notorious criminal. Luna said she had, and the Heart of Winter Gala at Malfoy Manor when Umbridge asked after that as well. "Who bought you these clothes for those occasions?"

But Luna could catch her drift, and answered, bright and honest, "Narcissa Malfoy. It was very nice of her."

Umbridge faltered, but then regained her composure, with a change in the syrupy inflection of her voice that showed poison seeping in. "Do you have any *nicknames* at school, dear?"

"What do you mean?" Luna asked, while Draco's breath caught in his chest.

"Do your classmates call you anything other than Luna? *Loony Lovegood*, perhaps?"

There was no shame in Luna's eyes as she answered, "Yes, they do."

"Why do they call you that, poor sweet girl? Do they think you don't have a grip on reality?"

"I don't know," Luna said, in an even voice just like Dumbledore had coached her.

"Were you ever picked on or bullied at Hogwarts?" Umbridge asked, and Luna had to say yes. "Did your cousin Draco intervene to put a stop to it?" Luna had to say yes to that too. "Were you friends with the other students here first, or was your cousin?"

"Draco was," Luna asked, with the implication seeming to dawn clearly in her sad eyes as well as the court's ears.

Harry had to reach over and grab Draco's knee. Looking down, Draco could see his hand had been inching towards his wand pocket.

"So he brought you in to be friends with Harry Potter and *his* friends! My- *hem, hem*- that's something special, isn't it? Tell me, do you have any friends at Hogwarts *other* than your cousin, and *his* friends in his year?" Luna said no with admirable composure, only for Umbridge to press on in a tone like the cat who caught the canary. "So you have your cousin who takes you to pureblood *balls*, gets you beautiful *dresses*, gets you famous *friends*, and protects you from the children who call you *crazy*! Surely you must feel very indebted! And you must be *terrified* at the thought of displeasing him or losing his friendship! My poor impressionable child, where would you be without him?"

"Dolores, this is becoming truly unnecessary," Dumbledore said sharply.

"As you said, Albus," Umbridge said, saying Dumbledore's name like a filthy word, "We should learn the characters of these young witnesses of yours, should we not? And the things that... *motivate* them. Luna, sweet girl, can you honestly tell me that you would *ever* be capable of saying no to your cousin, whatever he asked of you? Even to lie?"

"I wouldn't lie," Luna said, although Draco knew that itself to be a lie. He didn't know how convincingly she had delivered it, either.

"But you must admit that you are very much in his debt," Umbridge persisted. Unlike Ron and Hermione, Draco could see Umbridge's insinuations putting pain on Luna's face.

"That's not true!" Luna protested. "He needs my friendship *more* than I need his!"

And Umbridge actually giggled. "Oh, you sweet girl, where could you have gotten *that* idea?"

"He said so once," Luna said softly, voice cracking, and Draco wanted to burn the courtroom to the ground.

"Sugar plum," Umbridge simpered, "He was being *kind*. You would have to be very detached from reality indeed, not to see how much you gain from being in favor with Draco Malfoy. Don't you pretend you don't know what a burden you must be on your cousin! What an embarrassment he must find it to be associated with someone called *Loony Lovegood*! Could

it be you are *ungrateful*? Or are you merely too blind to see your cousin would never keep around a plain, talentless, *odd* girl like you, without needing to use you to *lie* for him?"

Luna didn't answer. A hot, wet tear rolled down her face, and then she buried her face in her hands and began to sob.

Umbridge smirked. "Oh, no, dear... Poor girl, don't cry..."

The sadism in her voice was evident, like the sight of Luna reduced to sobbing by her cruelty was fuel for her ego. Draco didn't realized he'd gotten to his feet until the eyes in the courtroom had turned to stare at him. Ron had reached over and pulled him down. "It's not worth it, mate..."

"She'll pay for this," Draco whispered, incapable of anything cleverer than that. His wand would have been more eloquent.

At least Umbridge seemed to lose some of her satisfaction as she realized Luna had descended truly into hysterics, far too much to answer any more of her questions. A lot of people in the courtroom were starting to look sympathetic, or in the case of Fudge, increasingly uncomfortable.

Dumbledore came forward and took Luna by the shoulders protectively, a rare cold fury in his usually ever-twinkling blue eyes. He had looked less offended by Draco letting Death Eaters into Hogwarts and declaring his intention to murder him. "I believe this fourteen-year-old has suffered enough psychological torture, Dolores, for you to make your point." He led Luna away from the stand. Fudge declared a recess, clearly to give Luna a chance to compose herself.

They had to leave Sirius chained, but the rest of them went with Luna to the defense's chamber, a small private stone room just outside the courtroom. The flashes of the waiting photographers erupted at their exit, Dumbledore shepherding out his students protectively, while Hermione let Luna hide her face in her hair. Even Severus was scowling darkly at the treatment Luna had gotten.

"Luna, I'm so, so sorry you got put through that," Draco began, only for Luna to poke her head out of Hermione's hair, face wet but bright with untainted excitement.

"Do you think they bought it?" she asked happily, and everyone, even Dumbledore, regarded her with incomprehension. "Oh, *you* all didn't even realize I was faking?" She looked impressed with herself. "That woman really was horrid, wasn't she? I thought I should show everyone how horrid she was being. It's easy to make myself cry, all I have to do is think about Tom!"

"Oh, Luna, don't ever do that to me again!" Hermione wailed, enfolding Luna in a sisterly embrace as she sniffled. "*I* was ready to march up and cast Langlock on that woman!"

"That," Draco said fervently, "Would have been the greatest moment of my life." At Remus's glare, he added, "But of course it's good she didn't, for Sirius's sake..."

Luna had done her magic. Fudge had backed down on the character assassination strategy after that, mainly because his attack dog had made herself look like a monster, making Luna cry. Keeping it up wouldn't be playing to the crowd anymore. Luna was not just fourteen, as Dumbledore had reminded them, but blonde and blue-eyed, pureblooded, and as innocent and ethereal-looking as you could get. Making her cry was like slicing and dicing a unicorn.

It was lucky that kept the unicorn stabber at bay for the next few testimonies, as Remus, Harry, and then Severus would all have provided far more material than the first three. Fudge merely confined himself to verbally establishing their connections to Harry, Draco, and Sirius in a factual way, without any of Umbridge's editorializing or dark hints.

Even that was a mixed bag, as Severus took the chance to let them know how much he did not hold any bias *towards* Sirius Black or Harry Potter. "I would much rather see him hang," Severus said coolly. "That's why I set the Dementors on him. But I've been asked questions about that night, so I'll answer them truthfully."

Severus hadn't actually seen Pettigrew, so maybe he hadn't been necessary. But his confirmation of his antagonistic role in their narrative was a nice finishing touch, as was that dry contemptuous air of truth he gave his words. He could, at least, make them all believe his hatred.

Fudge breathed visibly with relief when Harry finished, and no attempt had been made by either side to return to the issue of how Pettigrew had actually died. They'd all agreed to choose their battles. This trial couldn't become about whether the Dark Lord was back. It was about whether Sirius would go free.

Dumbledore had left Draco to the last, repeating points raised by more likable, trustworthy individuals. He knew, though, that he was likely to provoke the return of an attacking Umbridge, if anything would. After he delivered his polished rendition of the story of Wormtail's confession, answering Dumbledore's questions with an eloquent readiness that even impressed himself, the prosecution had the chance to give their cross examination. And boy, did they ever cross, and did they ever examine.

Up came Umbridge, and Draco expected her to dick around a bit, picking at his ties to Sirius, but instead, she went right for the jugular. "Hello, Draco. Do you think the court should consider you a credible witness?"

Draco smiled respectfully. "I presume you're about to tell us all why they shouldn't."

"Draco, were you ever accused of attacking other students with a Basilisk?"

And the correct response to that was playing the innocent victim, but Draco was fifteen now. A little old to keep playing possum. And his resolution not to make an enemy of the woman had gone up in smoke, the minute she spoke the way she had to Luna, fake tears or not.

Two could play that game. He could make people gasp just as much as she could.

"Yes, I was accused."

"And is it true even your own friends suspected you of being the Heir of Slytherin?"

"Yes, but not the Ministry," Draco drawled. Really, this woman was going to be Hogwarts headmaster, for a time. Didn't she know the Hogwarts motto, *Draco Dormiens Nunquam Titillandus*? "The *Ministry* didn't suspect me, clearly, or they wouldn't have had our Care of Magical Creatures professor arrested and sent to Azkaban for it. *Without a trial.* But I can see how that might be easy to forget, since he was released shortly after when the real Heir of Slytherin was caught." Draco pretended to think before looking up towards Fudge. "Except... no, the ministry *shouldn't* forget, because weren't *you* the one to personally arrest him, Minister Fudge?

Fudge looked like could have throttled him. "*We* are the ones asking questions, Mr. Malfoy."

"Apologies, sir," Draco said, widening his grey eyes cutely at him, before turning his young cute face all around the courtroom to show his undaunted conviction in his own innocence. "I was just trying to answer Miss Umbridge's question whether I was the Heir of Slytherin. And whether the Ministry thought I was. I should think not, given that another man was arrested and falsely imprisoned without trial in Azkaban for it, but I suppose that's not uncommon..."

"You were never charged for the attacks," Umbridge acknowledged. "But you were suspected, and bound up with the case-"

See how she liked being the one interrupted. "Bound up? Oh, yes. I received an award for special services to the school, for helping *catch* the real Heir of Slytherin and stop the attacks. Thank you for bringing that to the court's attention."

"An award granted by Albus Dumbledore," she said dismissively. "What is it *you* did to stop the monster?"

Draco chose the humorous self-deprecation card. Always worked well with large audiences. "Not much, to be honest. Harry's the one who killed the monster. That's his whole hero deal, slaying Basilisks with swords and that. Me, my main contribution was hiding and keeping Ron from looking directly at the Basilisk. Ron's a curious sort. And of course, I provided the visual appeal."

Draco earned a small titter there that emboldened him. Umbridge had lost the onlookers with her treatment of Luna. Now he could win them over, Malfoy or not, if he played his cards right. Fudge had likely planned to turn him into an adverse witness for Dumbledore, and instead, the only adversity Draco intended to cause was for Fudge himself.

"Visual appeal?" Umbridge echoed, blankly disapproving.

Draco posed, raking a hand through his hair and lounging back in the chair. "I suppose I'm a bit *young* for you, Miss Umbridge. But perhaps, when you were closer to my age, you might have found me *devastatingly* handsome."

The laughter then was far louder. Fudge and Umbridge exchanged furious glances, able to tell how badly this was going off the rails. "You were accused," Umbridge pressed on, "Of

helping Harry Potter sneak his name into the Goblet of Fire and illegally enter the tournament!"

"I didn't," Draco said, making sure to deny it before offering his own special commentary on the situation. "And no one even formally *accused* me of that one. I'd want to ask the *Ministry*, actually, about what kind of tournament they ran, where their ancient magical artifact could be enchanted to enter a fourteen-year-old into fighting *dragons*..."

That cracked her temper, as he had known it would. The sweet persona was attenuating like thin milk. "You were formally accused and arrested last year," she snapped rather savagely, "For casting the Dark Mark at the Quidditch World Cup!"

There were gasps at that, as Umbridge played her ace in the hole. But Draco had one of his own. He rolled up both his sleeves pointedly, to show no Dark Mark on either wrist. "Oh, see, that? That was just about the Minister's watch."

"*What*?"

Draco leaned forward, taking on as conversational a tone as if they were gossiping in the Three Broomsticks. "See, I had just won the minister's pocket watch off him, betting on the outcome of the cup final. Me and my father were at his box as personal guests, and I bet our watches that Krum would catch the Snitch but lose the match. So the Minister had to forfeit that lovely article you see on my handsome uncle over there, the dapper young man in all the fetching chains-"

Sirius smirked and twisted to show off the pocket watch, come loose from under the chains. Everyone leaned in to see. "I fail to see how this is relevant," Fudge said sourly.

"Oh, I'm getting to it," Draco drawled, tossing his head haughtily. "See, when there was an attack after the cup, I fled into the woods with my friends and hid like everyone else did. And so when the Mark was cast, the officials signaled *me* out to be arrested out of everyone there, even though a different wand was found to have cast the spell. Because once they secured and searched me, they could get the minister his *watch* back! I know, because they secured and bound me, but let me go right after without charging me. Unfortunately for them, I left the watch back in my tent.

"And *that* is the story of how I was suspected as a Death Eater, when my only crime was to relieve the Minister of a certain antique piece of timekeeping equipment- when, after all, I think any objective party would have to admit, in a game of *who wore it better*, my dashing uncle *has* rather come out on top..."

The courtroom erupted into shocked glee, the noise deafening from both press and officials. Draco looked over and caught Sirius's gaze. He couldn't have looked more smug as he tilted his hip to show off the look. It was like Remus had said. Sirius's chains did suit him.

Umbridge took one last shot, give her that, though if she'd had any sense, she'd have been trying to get him off the stand as quick as she could. Bad enough she'd already been laughed off half the way to the Fountain of Magical Brethren. "Can you deny, though, Mr. Malfoy, that you have at your young age earned the reputation of a very dark wizard?"

"Oh, people *talk* about me," Draco agreed, smiling as if it was a compliment. "But when they call me a dark wizard, what they really mean is that I'm powerful. It's a common weakness in perception, to mistake power for evil. Common to those who are jealous because they have no power of their own. 'I am envy. I can't read, so I want all the books in the world burned.'"

Maybe he shouldn't have been quoting a Muggle playwright on the stand, but then, Umbridge shouldn't have been wearing pearls that shade of pink. *Choices*.

Fudge's lot got Draco off the stand after that, as soon as they damn well could.

Draco had been the last witness. After that, it was time for closing remarks, before the Wizengamot adjourned for deliberation. Fudge gave a long rambling speech about how Black was a dangerous dark wizard from an evil family, backed up by another dangerous dark wizard who had bribed and terrified the others into lying for him. He didn't name Draco, but Draco gave a jaunty little wave at the mention.

"If you free Sirius Black," Fudge finished, practically foaming at the mouth, "You will be letting the most dangerous criminal alive back out into the wizarding world, and no one, not wizards, not Muggles, not anyone under the sun will be able to feel safe, now that Sirius Black is walking free amongst them."

Dumbledore's speech was more concise. "Fourteen years ago," he began, "We received word that the Death Eaters were after James and Lily Potter. We decided to hide them with a Fidelius charm, and make Sirius Black their Secret Keeper. But unbeknownst to the world, they made the fatal decision to secretly change their Secret Keeper to their humble school friend Peter Pettigrew, whom they thought no one would ever suspect."

The facts had already been laid out, but Dumbledore was sure to lay them out this last time in no uncertain terms. They were the note to end on, in a speech that would probably be reprinted at length for months and years to come. "Pettigrew was already a spy. He took this news to his master, who went after the Potters. But it did not go to plan. Harry Potter lived, and Lord Voldemort was vanquished. Pettigrew was left desperate. He had betrayed one side, and with the fall of Voldemort, the Death Eaters thought he had betrayed them as well, and were coming for him. So he faked his own death.

"When an enraged, grieving young Sirius came to confront him, he staged his own death, casting the blasting curse to leave the illusion of his body decimated amongst the dead. He cut off his own finger, escaped as in his form as an unregistered Animagus, and began a new life hiding out from the world as a rat, in a family where he would be sure to hear news of the dark lords return someday. We have heard the word of a number of witches and wizards of different ages and backgrounds and loyalties, attesting to you of their witness that Pettigrew was an Animagus, and that he confessed to his crimes.

"While he escaped, Sirius Black was found at the scene of the crime, laughing, because he had lost everything. Two of his dearest friends were dead, another was the culprit, and those who remained he knew would not believe him. The loss had broken him. But he should have had a trial. He should have had a chance to defend himself. In the chaos of war, he was cast away to Azkaban without the chance to ever tell the world the truth. It is a miracle he has retained his sanity, not just from so many years spent in such a terrible place, but from the

knowledge of what was taken from him- not just his friends, not just his reputation, not even just his freedom, but his potential."

Dumbledore smiled over at Sirius, his gaze showing nothing but absolute warmth. "Sirius Black was and *is* one of the brightest, bravest, strongest, and most promising wizards of his generation. *Our* world has been deprived of him, as much as he has been deprived of it. Those who have had the pleasure to know the real Sirius, and not the monster he has been painted as, know him as an incredibly devoted, loyal, loving and caring man, whose great passion in life now, his *only* passion, is to look after those he loves that remain to him. We as a country have let Sirius Black down. We have let ourselves down. We can only be thankful for the bravery of those who have risen their voices against the lies the world agreed to be true, and made a stand for what is right. We can only be thankful for Sirius Black, who never gave up on proving his innocence. Now we as a country must deliver him what he deserves, no more and no less: justice."

Draco resisted the urge to clap. He had to resist the urge to cry a moment later, when he looked over at his uncle and saw tears in his eyes. Remus had them as well. Draco leaned around Severus and squeezed Remus's shoulder, thinking, *This. This is what I was sent back for.*

If it works.

Please, please *let it work...*

The waiting could have hardly been worse if they had all been suspended naked from chains hung above a pit of hungry snapping turtles. It felt like days and nights passed, with them all left in that dim old sepulcher of a courtroom, where it felt like justice itself could only live as a desiccated corpse.

But the newspapers after said it had only been half an hour before the Wizengamot returned, and the foreman rose to announce that the defendant had been cleared of all charges, and rewarded a sum of 10,000 galleons for aggravated personal damages, for unlawful imprisonment without trial by the Ministry of Magic.

Open Sky

Chapter Notes

Hi all! Thanks so much for all your thoughts and comments! Yay free Sirius!

I might have been inadvertently inspired a bit by the legendary queen Miss Tati with Draco's choices remark about Umbridge. Has ever a person been a more apropos target for that? Also, I definitely see some Jack Sparrow in this Draco lol ^^ That's my Draco <3

And thanks to Chameleon_Incognito for suggesting the song for the playlist! :)

Playlist

Draco,

Write me no more letters. We cannot afford for them to be intercepted. I am also far too busy to indulge you. We will see each other daily at Hogwarts soon enough, impatient boy.

You should be capable, intellectually and magically speaking, of achieving all twelve OWLs, should you make a significant enough effort. Whether you have the desire and willpower sufficient to apply that mammoth level of effort, that should be your question. I suspect not.

To become an Unspeakable, in lieu of any other stated aspiration, you will require at least six NEWTs with no less than an E. I recommend you pursue NEWTs in the required subjects of Ancient Runes and Arithmancy, as well as Charms, Transfiguration, Potions, and Defense Against the Dark Arts. You will likely be able to attain more, but those are a logical minimum for your skills. To take those subjects past fifth year, you require an E on your OWLs, except for Potions, where I require an O. If you obtain less than an O on your Potions exam, consider our relation of godfather and godson as officially at a close.

As for this year, you will indeed be Slytherin Quidditch captain. That is my decision. I will not comment here on the motives for that decision, save to relay that it is not merely what you suspect. I have also wearied over the years of witnessing the same dull thuggish Quidditch from Slytherin, and believe a different approach is necessary to win the Quidditch Cup back. As such, I expect you to be a captain who leads the team with a different strategy. Begin work on these plans, if you are not still too incoherent from excessive celebration of your loathsome uncle's victory.

On that topic: no, I will not come to the Weasleys' putrid domicile to attend some barbaric Gryffindor festival for that victory. Never ask me such a disgusting thing again.

"I can't believe you're going to take all twelve OWLs," Hermione marveled, as she sat there helping Draco compile a list of books, to review for the subjects he had dropped or never taken. She chose not to mention his reversal on the subject of the Muggle Studies OWL, which corresponded rather obviously with his uncle being found not guilty. "I'm considering adding Muggle Studies, along with the ten classes I'm taking, but I haven't even thought about adding Divination..."

"Because you hate Divination," Draco laughed, and embarked on a childish wave of taunting her with Ron's help. But he had to abruptly desist in when she turned and asked him squarely, why exactly was it he dropped Divination anyway?

Remus was of the opinion Draco may be biting off more than he could chew, while Sirius was serenely confident in Draco. "He thinks if you're capable of standing up to the great Sirius Black in a duel, you'll just magically get O's in everything," Remus sighed fondly. Draco suspected Luna would incline more towards Sirius's school of thinking than Remus's. As for Harry, he refrained from commenting on the decision entirely.

Passing twelve OWLs became the first item on Draco's agenda for the year in the fifth notebook. With Sirius's freedom secured, it was easy to sit up in his Patronus-colored room and jot down the items he wanted to accomplish, even if they were more like bonus items now. First, he went over the list from fourth year for the first time in a while, marking himself and wincing at some of the results.

1. *Be damn sure the Portkey won't work in the Third Task. PREVENT RISE OF DARK LORD.*

Unsuccessful.

2. *Just in case, make sure Diggory doesn't touch it along with Potter. A. Better safe than sorry, and B. His family doesn't deserve the prize money anyway, his dad's a dickhead.*

Successful.

3. *Keep Luna out of trouble.*

Unsuccessful, and really, he had underestimated her.

4. *Avoid the Yule Ball. Just stay away from it. Nothing good will come of it.*

Unsuccessful. So, so unsuccessful.

5. *Don't get turned into a ferret.*

Well, he'd ended up *Imperiused* by 'Moody' instead, but still, *technically* successful...

6. *Improve at dueling. Seriously. You suck at it.*

Draco thought he could mark that as successful. Although still a work in progress.

7. *Have an inconspicuous year. Start shedding "young Dark Lord in training" image.*

Unsuccessful from the moment he flew a tornado at twenty Ministry employees. And he'd always vacillated on that point. Sometimes he thought it was safest to be feared.

8. *Keep practiced and in shape for Quidditch next year.*

Successful? He had spent a lot of time flying with Viktor Krum.

9. *Keep in contact with Uncle Sirius and make sure he isn't caught or killed.*

More successful than he could have dreamed.

10. *Get over obsession with Potter.*

Had anyone ever been *less* successful at a goal?

He decided five out of ten could be worse, and moved on. This year's list read as follows:

1. *Attain OWLs in all twelve subjects.*
2. *Keep from undermining Severus as a spy and getting him murdered.*
3. *Keep Aunt Bella or anyone else from murdering Uncle Sirius!* (Three underlines.)
4. *Keep Aunt Bella from taking her wand back.*
5. *Catch the Snitch against Gryffindor.*
6. *Win the Quidditch Cup as Slytherin captain.*
7. *Drag the blunderbusses to OWL success somehow. And Neville Longbottom, he'll need it.*
8. *Absolutely no more blood magic rituals! No exceptions!*
9. *Never succumb to the delusion you are anywhere close to good enough for Harry Potter.*

There was no tenth item. Draco counted that as a good sign, and found himself unusually carefree, as he arrived at the party at the Burrow awaiting Sirius in honor of his freedom. He had never seen the area around so crowded, with most of the party-goers milling around the great number of tents with hanging lights, all of the decorations as well as the attendees' clothes in the bright sky blue that Molly Weasley had chosen as the theme color, to represent Sirius's freedom with the open sky.

"It's true," Sirius had said, staring up at the open sky as they arrived in mid-afternoon with Weasleys still levitating up blue fairy lights. "In Azkaban, I did miss the sky. Almost as much as I missed Remus's voice..."

Draco didn't remember any sentiments half so poetic passing his mind during his own stay in Azkaban, but he supposed he hadn't been there for nearly as long.

He had invited Dobby to come celebrate Sirius's victory, given the not-small part he'd had in making it happen, but Dobby had insisted he would feel ill at ease, and just looked forward to seeing Draco at Hogwarts. Draco hoped that when they reunited, he found Dobby had gotten at least one or two of the other elves around to not thinking him a dangerous freak.

Other than Dobby's absence, the turnout was nothing to sneeze at. People began to Apparate or Floo in through the Weasley fireplace by 4 PM, and the sun was still high in the August sky by the time a great cacophonous mass of people had assembled in Sirius's honor.

Draco went around writing down the name of every attendee in his fifth notebook, which was not exactly in the party spirit, but curiosity had won out. There was everyone from Grimmauld, for starters, and every single Weasley, down to Charlie come back from Romania, whose presence Draco had a bad feeling would not leave Harry thrilled. He got almost a full register of the Order of the Phoenix there, down to McGonagall and even Dumbledore himself, apparently doing his best to stay surrounded by people and avoid any personal time with Harry.

He had expected that group, but he had also invited all the witnesses for the defense from the trial, even Millie and Pansy. Mrs. Weasley had okayed that move, knowing they owed them, though she looked uncomfortable about it. Draco had just told her they would never show up anyway. But to his astonished excitement, they appeared together by their own custom Portkey, looking around as warily as if they expected a chorus of Stupefy to greet their arrival. He was familiar with that feeling of being deep behind the lines in enemy territory, and unable to understand why you had not yet been cast out from their midst. He directed them to the tent with all the refreshments, including the alcoholic ones, and joined them in sneaking some mixed drinks when the dozing bartender had his back turned.

He showed Millie and Pansy his list of attendees before taking them out into the cornfield, under one of the many strings of lights. He conjured bluebell flames to follow above them, then a large, lavish set of cushions to sit on atop the dirt paths. In truth, at such a massive, nearly all-Gryffindor event, he too found himself more comfortable in the present of other Slytherins. They could go back when the official part of the party happened, and Sirius's freedom would be toasted at sunset as planned. But for now, it was more peaceful than he could believe. Especially when Millie began to tease a blushing, genuinely smitten-looking Pansy about how much she and Blaise had been hanging out over the summer.

Talk about a celebration of freedom. Sirius had been freed from the specter of Azkaban. Could Draco have been freed as well, from the unwanted affections of Pansy Parkinson? He would happily toast to that.

He felt no guilt leaving the side of the guest of honor, whom he saw everyday at home. Sirius would be rightfully the center of everyone's attention, made much of by all and sundry. He could genuinely be called, for this month or so at least, the most famous person in the country. Not a day passed without his face on the cover of the papers. Unfortunately, that also went with speculation on Pettigrew's death. The chief theory seemed to be that Sirius had hunted down and killed Peter, for real this time, and that Harry Potter had made up that story about Voldemort to protect his godfather after he'd avenged his parents. A smaller group thought it had been Harry avenging his parents himself. But even if Sirius was believed

guilty, Pettigrew had been proved publicly such a vile figure that the idea he had vanquished him only added to his mystique.

Harry had to be enjoying not being the most famous person about for once. But he still looked unhappy for Draco to have spent the whole party away from him, once he cornered Draco out in the fields.

Draco had given in to temptation and told Millie and Pansy that Severus was making him Quidditch captain. "Honestly, Millie, have you been playing this summer? You're a far better Keeper than Bletchley. I know there aren't normally girls on the team, but..."

"There are never girls on the team," Pansy said crossly. "If there could be, I'd have tried out for Chaser years ago, I'm the best in all our year at that, but it's not allowed, so..."

Severus *had* said he expected a tactical shift. "Maybe that can change," Draco said thoughtfully, "Now that *I'm* the captain."

"You're going to be made captain of Slytherin's team?" Harry's voice asked from above them, and Draco hastily vanished each of their several empty cups. "Since when?"

"Severus said in a letter," Draco lied, "I just got it," and willed Pansy and Millie's fathers not to have known and told them sooner, or at least for them not to mention it.

"But you're only a fifth-year," Harry said, frowning. "There are older players on your team, aren't there?" He crossed his arms, looking rather adorable in the large light blue button-down he had borrowed from Sirius, having nothing of the color of his own. "Why would you be-"

"Did you listen to what he just said, Potter?" Pansy sniped, rolling her eyes. "His *godfather* said. The captain is up to the Head of House. Who did you *think* Professor Snape would choose?"

"That's not fair," Harry said, with a stubbornness that might not have been so pronounced, should he not have found Pansy and Millie being told the news first.

"I," Draco informed him, feeling the alcohol he had consumed all begin to kick in, "Am going to be a stunning captain. The *best* captain. Better than Angelina Johnson." Harry didn't blink at that, just scowled at the aspersion against his teammate, so hopefully that had already been established, and Draco hadn't just given away his future knowledge. "I can coach a Quidditch team to glory with my hands tied behind my back... and no, Harry, that's not an invitation..."

Millie and Pansy giggled, none the least because Harry's gaze indeed dropped to Draco's hands once he mentioned them. Draco tried not to remember that one maddening dueling lesson they had spent with Harry practicing binding charms on him, except as a joke. But Harry must be, to judge by the heat as well as annoyance on his face. "Put your money where your mouth is, then."

"Quidditch?" Draco said lazily, reclining backwards. "I suppose it looks like it'll be light still for a while... but Mrs. Weasley would kill us..."

"I already asked her," Harry said with grim satisfaction. "It was my idea. I thought if I was Sirius, I would want to play Quidditch again, to celebrate being free. That's why I came to get you, if you want to play. You can be one of the captains. Fred is the other. Oh, and you get Sirius."

Draco was tempted to just sit back and loll about with his Slytherins, perhaps trying to steal a few more adult beverages for them by a summoning charm, until Harry called as he left, "What? Scared, Draco?"

"You wish!" Draco exclaimed, and got to his feet with what he thought admirable steadiness. If he could walk in a straight line, he could play Quidditch.

They had assembled enough people for two full teams and an audience, lots of partygoers gathered around the makeshift Quidditch pitch that Fred and George had set up, marked by the usual trios of copper hoops high in the sky. There were enough broomsticks there as well, between the Weasleys and the ones Harry had brought from Grimmauld. "It was a surprise," he said resentfully, "And you missed seeing Sirius's reaction," though Draco could only guess at whether it had been a happy surprise for him.

"Are you captaining the other team, Harry?" Draco asked, only to get a weird look.

"No, Fred is, I told you," Harry said, and okay, maybe Draco was kind of drunk by now.

"Okay, let's go!" Fred shouted. "The first and only inaugural Sirius Black Freedom Championship is soon to begin! We all thank Mr. Black for his gracious prize of fifty Galleons to the winner." The way everyone laughed meant Fred and George had definitely made that up, but Sirius just laughed and nodded. It looked like he was taking Harry's surprise well indeed. "It's time to pick teams! I've gone first and picked Harry. Draco's picked Sirius." Sirius grinned at Draco, and Draco resisted the urge to shoot daggers at Harry over his shoulder.

"George," Fred chose.

Draco caused some murmurs of surprise with his next pick. "Millie! You're our Keeper."

Millie ran forward, grinning widely, her broad freckled face shockingly pretty when she smiled that much. "Try and get past me, Weasleys!" she called.

"Ron," Fred said, with more loyalty than sense.

"Pansy," Draco said, and Sirius was looking less happy to have been picked for Draco's team.

"Trust me," Draco whispered in his ear, "They're good."

"They're also drunk," Sirius hissed, "And so are you, aren't you?"

Draco considered this objectively. "Just a little-bittle," he conceded. "A little sippy-sippy."

"Salazar save us," Sirius groaned, while Fred chose Ginny. "Me and three drunken Slytherins versus the whole Weasley clan."

That seized Draco with inspiration. "Charlie!" he called, and Harry's head whipped around as quickly as if he had just become the subject of an exorcism. Charlie extricated himself from a lazy, whisky-accompanied conversation with Bill and strolled over, grinning. He had shed his leather in the hot summer weather, and looked dashing as ever, in ripped jeans and a tank top that showed off his muscular build. Draco raised a hand, and Charlie gave him a high five as he joined. Sirius didn't react, but Millie and Pansy both jerked away in shock, as if they had engaged in some depraved sex act right in front of them.

"Save your sadomasochistic sex games for the bedroom!" Millie hissed, scandalized.

Draco wrinkled his nose at them. "It's called a high five. It means you're on the same team."

"What are you doing?" Harry called over, as incensed as if he was indeed the opposing captain and not Fred. "Charlie's a Seeker!"

"I wouldn't mind playing Chaser," Charlie said, and Blaise or not, Pansy looked even more excited to be playing Chaser on their team now.

"Fine!" Harry spat. "We'll have-"

"Er, Harry," said Fred, and Harry stepped back red-faced, seeming to remember he didn't get to pick the team. No one seemed to be taking this playful party game scrimmage at all seriously besides Harry. But he was taking it seriously enough for all of them combined. "We'll have Bill."

Bill got up looking rather topsy-turvy, which made Draco feel good for their prospects. He still had to keep in mind what this was for, though. They were doing this for Uncle Sirius, not just yet another pit stop in him and Potter's eternal grudge match. "Remus, do you wanna play?" Draco called, to Pansy and Millie's outraged Slytherin shrieks.

"No, no, I'm far happier watching," Remus called, from where he'd already gotten himself a lawn chair and a drink. His nose looked sunburned despite all the charms he'd applied, but he couldn't have looked more contented with his life and choices. The sheer amount of vodka he'd looked to have consumed might have also had something to do with it.

"Okay," Draco said, and looked about. He once again provoked the girls' shrieks when he called, "Hermione! What? She's my best friend!" It hit him that Pansy might not relish the idea of playing on a team with a Muggleborn girl, or at least one she had once so publicly called Mudblood. But Hermione just came over smiling, looking surprised but happy to be picked.

Fred looked around thoughtfully, then called, "Luna!" He clearly did it to aggravate Draco, who waved his arms and sputtered at him incoherently as Luna ran over to them.

"I was going to pick her," Draco whined, "She's *my* cousin," and Pansy and Millie looked very relieved they hadn't been saddled with Luna, who might as well never have played a real

Quidditch match in her life. "Fine, erm..." He had the last pick. "Anyone really want to play who wasn't picked? Willing to pick up a bat and whack Bludgers at these Gryffindor ne'er-do-wells?"

Tonks waved her arms excitedly. She had been in Hufflepuff, hadn't she? Draco told himself she wouldn't use this chance to seek revenge with a Bludger into the back of her own Seeker's head.

"Alright!" Draco called. "Cousin Tonks! Guess that makes us officially Team Black. Team Weasley, it is *on*!" Draco picked up a random broom, and wandered off before Hermione hurriedly took it from him, and switched it for his Nimbus 2001 that Hermione had brought from home.

"Does anyone know a Sobering charm?" she hissed, only for Tonks to throw an arm around Draco, seeming three sheets to the wind herself, and declare that was half the fun of it.

The match passed by in a blur of blue sky and then impending sunset, as the blue darkened to a cornflower shade and then took on a golden haze behind the swooping, joyful players as they raced about their chaotic way over the cornfields. Tonks had transfigured all of Team Black's shirts to black, which would fade as soon as the match was done. Most of the onlookers were cheering for Team Weasley, but not all, with Mad-Eye Moody of all the damn people a vocal supporter of Team Black below, when it had his protégé Tonks playing Beater on it. And Cedric bloody Diggory beside him, standing there in sparkling sleeveless light blue like the world's most dashing ghost... cheering for the woman whose protégé he had in turn become, it had turned out, in his own Auror training.

Tonks was a surprising asset for Team Black, as was her cousin Sirius. Fred and George were excellent, well-practiced Beaters, but there were more grown adults on Draco's team, whacking heavy objects at the children. Hermione wasn't much at Chaser, but Luna was even worse. She didn't seem to understand where she should be at any point, though she was having what seemed a lovely time of it regardless.

It balanced out. If anything, with an honestly superior Keeper in Millie over Ron, and an ace in the form of the flying terror that was Charlie Weasley, Team Black had the edge over Team Weasley. As was only fitting, for Sirius's own party. Arthur Weasley, keeping score below, soon had the misfortune of calling out, "Parkinson scores again! 80 to 30, Team Black!"

It really was wonderful for Harry to have thought of. Draco had spent a lot of time in Azkaban thinking about how he would never get to play Quidditch again, and remembered the shocking thrill of taking to the air again against Harry in first year, like being reborn from some dark pit. He could see that same realization dawning on Sirius's face as he passed him.

Sirius played Beater with a real speed and viciousness. When he was complimented, he attributed his fitness to so much dueling practice with Draco. Hearing that just made Harry look more annoyed, especially with Sirius using that prowess to merrily pursue his godson and pelt him with Bludgers. It left Draco free to go after the Snitch. He actually spotted it, without Harry noticing, near Remus's lawn chair. But if he caught it, everyone's fun would be over, and they would all have to go in and listen to speeches...

Draco yawned and let the Snitch flicker out of sight, lazily tracing it until it joined the golden haze over the horizon, within the charmed barriers of the field shape that Fred and George had made them. The score had climbed all the way up to 120-60 before there was another sight of the Snitch, announced by Harry making a sudden breakneck dive.

Again, it seemed to have floated near the direction of Remus's lawn chair, who yelped and jumped off, rolling out of the way while struggling to keep his most recent vodka martini upright. Draco went into a dive of his own following Millie's shout. Harry would have beaten him easily, should the Snitch not have flitted beneath the slots of the chair. Harry crashed into the chair, hand groping through the chair in desperation. Draco rolled over his broom with what he thought a rather stylish flair, and shoved his hand under the chair to pluck it out from below, just an inch from Harry's fingertips.

When Draco rolled back up, leaping to his feet with only a few swaying steps, Arthur Weasley had to call out, with the reluctance but amusement of the gracious loser, "Draco Malfoy catches the Snitch! Team Black is victorious, 270 to 60!"

Draco was immediately leaped on, forced back to the ground by any number of excited teammates, Millie the first on his back, bellowing with an excitement that portended well for the chances of her coming to Quidditch tryouts this year. It was as Sirius extricated Draco from the pile, pulling Draco up by the scuff of his neck as he proudly declared that this was his nephew, that Draco caught sight of Harry. He was sitting on the ground beside the chair, face almost frighteningly blank.

It was the first time Draco had ever caught the Snitch against Harry with both of them conscious, though admittedly Remus's lawn chair had provided a confounding variable. But the rush of it, even the rush of winning for his team and giving Sirius a victory, temporarily went up in smoke when he saw the look it had put on Harry's face.

"And so," Fred declared, a very good sport, "The inaugural Sirius Black Freedom Championship is won by Team Black! Would their captain, Draco Malfoy, care to say a few words?" Fred offered him a glass of champagne, which Draco had the sense not to drink in front of any of the adults, and cast a nervous glance at Harry, who had risen to his feet.

"Only that I wish to dedicate our winnings," Draco said, seizing Sirius's arm and lifting it in the air, "To our team's official Man of the Match, Sirius Black!"

That got the loudest roar of the whole night.

The sun had nearly set by the time Draco found Harry sitting in the living room of the Burrow. He had tried to follow him after the match, but he'd seemed to want to be alone. Now Draco wandered in with his full champagne glass still in hand, and wordlessly offered it to Harry.

"I don't drink," Harry said, who seemed to think it far more festive to sit there alone doing nothing in the dark. "Shouldn't you be out there celebrating with Charlie Weasley?"

Draco ignored the transparent jealousy and sat himself beside Harry. If Harry didn't want the champagne, he was happy to drink it himself. "Sore loser, Harry? Doesn't suit you."

"Then what are you doing here?" Harry bit out. "Just leave me alone-" His voice abruptly stopped when Draco reached out his free hand and ran his fingers through Harry's short hair.

"You have grass in your hair," Draco laughed, and Harry shifted nervously in his seat, some of the hostility in his gaze replaced by self-consciousness. "See? Here," he said, and showed Harry the strands once he extricated them.

"So do you," Harry said, and Draco turned his head in silent invitation. He heard Harry take a sharp breath in, but eventually, he obeyed, pulling the grass from Draco's hair with a far more perfunctory yanking motion. Draco sighed and yawned, relaxing down into the couch once Harry was done. "God, you really are drunk, aren't you?"

"I'm not that drunk," Draco protested. "What, am I acting drunk?" That was rich coming from the boy Draco had just beaten to the Snitch.

"You... you let me... you *wanted* me to touch your hair," Harry said anxiously, and Draco looked at him like he had a few screws loose.

"As if you've never done that before?"

"No, it's just- that was before- before I told you that I..." Harry struggled to get out, and raked a hand through his dark hair twice, motion abrupt and violent. When Draco leaned back in his seat, it put him close enough to smell Harry, whose scent was the most intense, the most perfect and Amortentia-like, right after Quidditch, dirt and grass and sweat and cheap Muggle shampoo and the expensive wood of his Firebolt, laid over with magic bright enough to set the dark room alight.

"I don't... I don't know how to act around you, now that I... that you... you know I..." Harry swallowed hard, Adam's Apple bobbing in his throat, and Draco just wanted to bury his face in Harry's neck there and inhale that scent, forgetting every reason in the world that he shouldn't.

"What are you talking about?" Draco sighed, squinting at him still too buzzed to follow clues. "Now that what? Now that I finally beat you at Quidditch?"

"There was a lawn chair in the way," Harry protested. Draco laughed and threw back the rest of his glass, stretching before wincing at the sweatiness of the cashmere sweater he'd charmed blue for the occasion. He pulled it off, leaving him in a blue V-neck, and Harry helped him when he struggled to push up the sleeves and keep them rolled without falling back down. "You *are* wasted, Draco, what the hell?"

"Still beat you," Draco sing-songed, swaying towards him, enjoying the feeling of Harry's hand brushing his own, before Harry pulled away.

"Shut up," Harry hissed, ducking his head. When their gazes were not literally fixed on each other's, Draco could see he was no longer distraction enough to keep whatever misery had

been sitting on Potter's shoulders from forcing itself back in.

"Harry," Draco said carefully, "There a reason you aren't out there with everyone else?"

Harry shrugged. "Didn't really feel like it," he muttered, and Draco had to poke him in the scar to get his gaze back on him again. "That's been hurting a lot recently," he admitted. "I haven't been sleeping." But Harry hadn't been coming to see him if he had nightmares, not since the trial. "I mean, what do you want me to say, Draco? I know I should just be happy to be away from the Dursleys, that the year's starting soon and I still get to go- that Sirius is free, that everyone's happy- that I'm still *alive* after what happened in the graveyard, but I just..."

Making fun of Harry might not be the best strategy here for once. "Just feel like there are Dementors nearby again, pulling at edges of you, draining you too slow and deep for anyone but you to even notice you're being pulled?" He pulled out his wand and conjured one, two, three, four balls of bluebell flames, sending them floating in the air above them like in his room in Grimmauld.

Harry's green eyes, half-luminescent under the blue flames, focused on him truly then. "Yeah," he muttered. "I just hate being around so many happy people. I can't stand it. Not after how bad I failed everyone last year. I'm the reason none of this is really safe. And don't try and say I didn't fail. It won't change how it feels. Draco, it doesn't feel like I belong here anymore."

"You're in luck, then," Draco drawled, "Because I'm never happy. I might as well be a Dementor myself-"

"But you're not," Harry said softly, biting his lip as he watched Draco's face. "Do you remember what I told you once? That you're like the opposite of a Dementor?"

"Yes," said Draco, as if that was the kind of thing he could have ever just forgotten.

"Because you are," Harry said, and Draco could feel Harry staring at his lips then, a hunger so pronounced it seemed to change his scent, a greater stringency to the spark of his magic, concentration denser as it pooled invisible-gold and liquid. "You're like some kind of... anti-Dementor. You... thank you for coming in, for sitting with me- I only feel safe these days around you, Draco. You're just so..." Harry licked his lips. "God, I wish that you..."

He didn't seem to have it in him to finish that sentence. Draco had a feeling he knew how it ended. And he was far, far too drunk to be having this conversation again.

Though the awareness curled through Draco's gut like electric gold. *Maybe Harry still... maybe he hasn't given up.*

Not yet.

"We should go back out," Draco said, grabbing Harry's hand and pulling him up. "It's time we toast to Sirius's freedom, yeah?"

"Yeah," said Harry, eyes heavy with words he hadn't spoken, and they went out to make the toast.

It was later the same night, much later, when they were all back at Grimmauld sobered up, that Draco caught his truest glimpse of what freedom meant to Sirius. Gone to stare aimlessly at the Black tapestry, as he did too often, he found Sirius already there, wistfully tracing beside his own blackened name.

"What?" Sirius said, looking up to see Draco's bewildered expression. "You're the one who insisted we keep this ugly old thing. You managed to take off Bella... do you think you could add a name? If removing isn't done automatically by magic, adding names shouldn't be either, I don't think..."

"You want me to put you back on it?" Draco asked doubtfully, and Sirius bit his lip, looking uncharacteristically boyish and bashful.

"I've just... ever since I was found innocent, I've had this thought," he muttered. "It's probably stupid, but just... at the party, I was thinking about the future, and then Luna said something to me as we were leaving, and... I don't know."

"Spill," Draco demanded, "If you want my help," and Sirius gave him a mighty glare, before looking down at his feet again. His arms wrapped around himself, body language going smaller and younger than Draco had ever seen it, in a way it hadn't even for Dementors.

"I just thought maybe I'd propose to Remus tonight," Sirius mumbled. "Or, well, tomorrow, when he's not too pissed to remember it..."

Draco must have misheard him. "Propose *marriage*? You know Luna just wants the right to call him Uncle Remus, right?"

"I wish you two *could*," Sirius sighed, and gathered his strength, before looking Draco in the eye resolutely. He looked more vulnerable without his beard, as if years had been stripped away from him. It was as if, like Draco, he had gone back in time to an earlier self, with terrible knowledge following back with him like a poisoned shadow.

"I want to marry Remus, Draco. I know it's not legal or anything, two men, but we could still have a ceremony, say the words... there's nothing to keep it from being magically binding, even if the Ministry doesn't recognize it. There's a House Black ritual... the solstice... And then maybe Remus would let me change the deeds and funds for all my holdings and titles to have him as co-holder. You know how stubborn and proud he can be about money... you think it's a terrible idea, don't you. He'd never say yes..."

It was just not something Draco had ever thought possible, beyond a pipe dream of Luna's. "Still magically binding?" he echoed disbelievingly, and Sirius nodded. "Merlin, Sirius, that's..."

"I know he deserves better than me," Sirius said, tearing both hands through his long dark hair in frustration. "Believe me. I know he spent so many years thinking I was guilty, and being involved again and committing to forever are two very different things... I know I'd be doing a terrible thing saddling him for life with *me*-"

"Uncle Sirius," Draco said firmly, "You want to spend the rest of your life with him?"

Sirius took a deep breath, then mustered his courage to say, "Yes. Yes, I do."

"Then," Draco said, "I'll do the hard part and figure out how to get him on the family tapestry. You get the easy part of asking him. There, easy as. Alright? Stop acting constipated."

"Draco?" Sirius said disbelievingly. "You- do you think there's a chance he'd say yes?"

"You'd better get your shit together," Draco observed critically, "If you really want to propose tomorrow. I mean, I get the impulse, but do you even know exactly what you'll say? You'll have to come up with something good and memorize it. *Remus* is so well-spoken, you know."

It was a shame that Remus would never be the one to propose, given that all the sense in the relationship was on his side. Even if the impulse occurred to Remus, though, Draco knew he would never do that, when all the *money* in the relationship was on Sirius's side.

"I don't know how it works with two men, but if you're planning to get on one knee, you'll probably want some sort of ring. I'd suggest the Black family signet ring, but I suspect you wouldn't be amenable-"

"Bloody hell, a ring," Sirius groaned, "How could I forget..." His eyes went to the tapestry again, and Draco traced a finger to follow his gaze. It fell not on Sirius's name, but those of his parents.

"You wouldn't want to give Remus anything of theirs, would you?" Draco sighed, and was struck by inspiration. "Tell you what, Uncle Sirius. I'll make you a deal. If you can summon up the stones to propose, I'll blast those two motherfuckers right off the tapestry for you." Sirius's face had broken into a wide, incredulous, ecstatic grin, so Draco added, "Your brother too, if you want."

"No," Sirius said, a shadow going through his dark eyes. "Not Regulus. Draco, what was I thinking, planning to do it this quickly? I need to do it properly, you're right, it's *Remus*. I can't rush it. I should do something grand. He deserves that. And if he says yes, I'll want to throw an engagement party, and you lot are going back to Hogwarts so soon..."

"Christmas?" Draco offered. "Nothing more romantic than a Christmas proposal. Get on one knee for him in front of the Christmas tree, or at midnight in the falling snow, and he'll have no choice but to say yes with bells on."

"Christmas," Sirius mused. "That's fair. That's more than enough time to come up with a ring and a good speech. And it gives *him* enough time to spend with me free, to realize if he actually still fancies me when he isn't guilt-bound to stay... oi, don't flick my forehead! I'm not Harry!"

"Uncle Sirius," Draco enunciated firmly. "Sirius Orion Black. *Bachelor of Azkaban.* If Remus hasn't proved his devotion to you yet, you're the most blind, ungrateful pillock in history. No, we can wait for Christmas because he *will* still be hanging around your sorry arse. Because we *have* time now. *You* have time." Draco couldn't help but smile, as tentative and incomplete as it felt. "You have your whole lives ahead of you." *I hope*.

"I'll need your help picking a ring, though," Sirius said with a less weighted sigh. "Rings for both of us, I suppose. It would be good if they matched. Equal and all that. I could just engrave something different inside his. You're always making jewelry, you've got an eye for these things..." And then an idea hit Sirius's face that boded no good things for Draco Malfoy. "Draco, *you* should make the rings! Don't worry, I'd give you the materials, and I'd pay you-"

"What the hell?" Draco complained. "The jewelry-making's just for fun, Uncle Sirius. I'm an amateur, not a real magical jeweler. I couldn't do anything that important. Don't lay that on me-"

"You're totally capable of it," Sirius argued, and then his eyes lit up again. "What about everything you've been saying about the Black legacy? About not throwing it away, but changing it? Turning it to mean something good, instead of burning it entirely? Sounds like *transfiguring* it."

"You want me to use your father's old signet ring," Draco breathed, "To make you and Remus wedding rings?" He'd have to wrest them from Kreacher's cold dead hands if he found out those were his intentions for them.

Sirius nodded. "And the rest of him and Mother's jewelry. More than enough precious metals and stones for you to choose from. Just be careful they aren't cursed. Seriously, Draco, you can have all that stuff-"

"It's expensive," Draco said, guilt stabbing at his insides. "Isn't that Harry's inheritance?"

"Harry or Remus," Sirius said, rolling his eyes, "Are not about to go swanning around in fancy pureblood jewelry the way you or your cousin might, now are they?" Draco wanted to object to that characterization, but since he was currently wearing his very expensive "Astaroth" necklace made of opal, it was a little more difficult. "They don't need it, and it's not like we're going to run out of money and need to sell it anytime soon. Take it, and use whatever you need to make Remus and I a pair of rings I can be proud to give him at Christmas."

It was an objectively terrible idea, given Draco's current capabilities at jewelry-making. But Draco heard himself saying, "Fine, let's discuss fees. I am not a *cheap* artisan..."

So the final item on Draco's list became *10. Make rings for idiot uncle and get him married.*

It'll just be up to me to keep him alive long enough.

Well, Draco had just caught the Snitch against Harry Potter. If he could do that, he could do *anything*.

The Slytherin Prefect

Chapter Notes

Hello all! To answer questions about my writing process, I write as it goes along, except for some key events- I've been working on Sirius's trial for a while as I go along, for example. I also have a tight set of outlines- I do a calendar day-by-day for each year, a list of chapters with contents that often changes as it goes, and I have the relevant excerpts copied from the books themselves in place, so that all makes it easier to keep up the pace! I have most of that done until the end of the sixth book, and I have looser plans/a timeline for the seventh.

As for why the Death Eaters and Voldemort still trust Draco- they don't! As Severus told Draco, they know he's been pulled over to the other side, but they're trying to change that- to "court" him and recruit him. Remember when Voldemort tried to get Neville bloody Longbottom, leader of Dumbledore's Army, to join up in book 7 lol? It's kind of like that :) They think they can get him back to their side.

BTW, bixxelated has made an amazing TVTropes page for this fic here! OMG it's so cool ^^

Anyway, enjoy! <3

Playlist

"You know," Harry said drearily one day, "Living at the anti-Voldemort headquarters isn't nearly as interesting or exciting as I would have expected."

It was a double-edged sword, being the person Harry spewed out all his most unpleasant thoughts to, things he would never say aloud to anyone else. On one hand, it made them closer, and made Draco more important to Harry. On the other hand, it gave a disturbing enough window into the handsome head of the Boy Who Lived, that Draco couldn't help but spend a great deal of useless time worrying after him. Which was only a step away from pining after him, which was something he was determined to never do, even if Harry's shoulders looked all the stronger after weeks of carrying things as he helped clean up Grimmauld.

"Yeah?" Draco said absently, turning the gold Black signet ring in his hand, before putting it back in its great onyx-and-gilt jewelry box.

"Yeah," Harry said. "Especially now that Sirius kicked me out of your dueling practices. There's people coming and going all the time, but no one ever tells me what they're doing." He frowned and peered over Draco's shoulder. "You've got out all the Black jewelry again." It had been easy to procure from Kreacher, telling him he wanted to take it to Hogwarts to Slytherin house, where it would be safer than here with Sirius around. "What are you planning to do with it?"

"Can't tell you," Draco said automatically.

"See?" Harry said gloomily. "Nobody tells me anything."

"Booklists have arrived," said Ron, coming in and throwing them their envelopes, with the twins following. They began to gossip with Harry about the Defense textbooks listed, meaning there would be a new Defense professor. Draco wished he could tell them they wouldn't be so happy when they found out who it was. He opened his envelope wider to look for his prefect badge. It had come with this letter in the blue loop, though Father had found out and told him weeks sooner.

The badge wasn't there. Huh. Funny. They must not be sending them out with this.

Except they had been, because there was Ron, with a red and gold badge falling from his envelope once the twins tipped it. There was also a letter telling him he'd been made prefect.

"There's been a mistake," Fred said, before letting Draco have a look at the letter. "No one in their right mind would make Ron a prefect."

Draco had been so smug at being a prefect when Harry wasn't last time, he'd even been happy to see that honor go to a Weasley. Now it seemed he and Harry would share that exclusion. He could see the twins looking over at Harry, ready to interrogate the decision, and Draco cut in before they could. "Clearly the system has gone off the rails. If the most handsome, talented, successful, and handsome boy in the whole *school* isn't made prefect, then the title is a farce." Their gazes didn't move from Harry, with Ron looking monstrously offended. "What, you think I mean Harry? I'm *obviously* speaking of myself."

"*You're* not a prefect?" Ron, Fred, and George all exclaimed in unison, scrambling over to research his envelope for him.

"With Snape your Head of House? How can that be?" Ron asked, and Harry got up, looking agitated.

"He made him Quidditch captain," Harry said in a curt tone. "Reckon he thought he'd be too busy if he made him prefect as well. He already gave him a slip to use all the prefect privileges last year anyway."

"Don't worry, you two, you're better off without it," George said awkwardly after a moment. "You don't want to turn out like *Percy.*"

"Ickle Ronnie the Prefect," George agreed, while Ron gingerly reached over and offered Harry the badge to see. Then Hermione busted in with her own letter, made prefect as well, as

Draco had known, and made the worst possible misinterpretation. Draco could only scoot himself out of the line of fire as Harry had to tell her that it was Ron, not him, and her flummoxed reaction left Ron on the defensive again.

Then Mrs. Weasley came in fussing in her maternal way over Ron. Draco could read the detachment deepen in Harry's eyes, something of the *Oh, look, he's got a Mum and mine was murdered when I was baby* crossing his face. "A prefect! That's everyone in the family!" Mrs. Weasley exclaimed. Draco tried and failed to suppress his mirth as Mrs. Weasley hugged Ron and sidestepped the twins, to their indignation.

"What are Fred and I, next-door neighbors?"

Draco and Hermione laughed, only to stop when they saw Harry's face. Mrs. Weasley kept enthusing over Ron, offering to buy him presents they clearly couldn't afford, and Harry was just staring at the wall now. They exchanged glances, trying to non-verbally communicate who should talk to Harry to console him, only for Mrs. Weasley to congratulate Draco and Hermione on also being made prefects on her way out. Draco stared after her, and let the door close before Fred and George began to laugh.

"I wasn't actually chosen for Slytherin," Draco said, and considered. "It's probably Theo..."

"You weren't WHAT?" Hermione shrieked. "Was it Theodore Nott, do you think? But he isn't half as smart as you!"

Draco shrugged elegantly. "Oh, Theo *is* very clever, though. And it probably comes down to who's gotten less detentions and all that as well, you know," he said, giving Harry a significant look. "Troublemakers need not apply."

"Oh, yeah, otherwise we'd have been prefects for sure," Fred said brightly.

The twins teased Ron a bit more before Disapparating, as they liked to leave rooms with since they'd got their licenses. Then Ron dashed out, speculating none-too-sensitively about which broomstick he'd have his mother buy him as a reward. Draco and Hermione exchanged glances again, and came to the silent conclusion that Hermione would be better at comforting Harry. But when Draco rose to leave him with Hermione, Harry did not seem happy.

"What," he muttered. "Don't you have to go get ready to be a prefect too, Hermione?"

His tone was uncharacteristically venomous enough that Draco saw the wisdom of leaving him with someone who hadn't just been rewarded an honor he'd been denied. "Hermione, let me," said Draco. She smiled at him weakly, before asking Harry if she could borrow Hedwig, to send a letter to her parents to let them know she'd been made prefect. Harry said yes, though Draco could practically hear his real answer: *Sure, I don't need her to send a letter to my parents that I've been made prefect, because I haven't been made prefect, and also,* I *don't* have *parents.*

"So," Draco said once Hermione had left with Hedwig, "We're the rejects, huh?"

"Shut up," Harry muttered, and flopped down onto his bed and buried his face in his hands.

Draco stared down at him, surprised to find him so unhappy not to be chosen. "You thought it would be you, not Ron, huh?"

"I forget prefects were this year," Harry muttered. "But yeah, I guess I would have expected it to be me. That Dumbledore would pick me. But I guess he hates me now anyway, so... go ahead, call me arrogant. I shouldn't be so shocked. I'm a terrible friend..."

"I don't know the exact quote," Draco said, sitting beside him on his bed, "But someone once said that the only thing more unbearable than the successes of our enemies, is the successes of our friends." He squinted. "Huh. Or maybe it went, the only thing more unbearable than the failures of our friends are their successes. Either way, you catch my drift."

"No," Harry muttered, "I don't," and Draco began to poke lightly at his back. Wow, Harry's shoulder blades really had gotten taut. It was like concrete under his fingertip. You could jam your finger on them.

"I mean," Draco said, "It sucks to be jealous, but it sucks worse when it's your friend. Then you feel like a shitty person, cause you're not supposed to be jealous, you're supposed to be *happy* for them. Now you see how Ron felt when your name came out of the Goblet of Fire last year..."

Harry rolled over at that, but he hardly looked pleased at Draco's analysis of the situation.

"I'm kind of relieved not to be a prefect, honestly, you know?" Draco added. He found he was, without the prospect of having to face his father and explain why he hadn't been chosen. "So much bloody *work*. And *I'm* glad Ron got it and not you- don't pout. Yeah, rejection feels like shit, but this means so much more to him than it would to you. Don't you remember what he saw in the Mirror of Erised?"

"So he can get what *he* saw in that mirror," Harry said in a small voice, choked up at a reference Draco had been too stupid to think through, "But *I* won't. I never can." Draco bit his lip, trying to figure out how to so much as make a dent in this moody lump before him, and then Harry asked a question that made it all the harder to know how. "What did *you* see in it? You never said."

Draco pulled his hand back from the vicinity of Harry's side as if it was radioactive. "I. Er. Well." He didn't know why he'd never thought of a lie for this. It had just seemed like the situation had long passed. It would have, if he hadn't been the one to bring it up. What would Harry believe of Draco? Himself as an Unspeakable? Married to some gorgeous faceless man? Standing over the corpse of his father? "Harry, I..." Harry got so mad when Draco didn't tell him things. But he would, as soon as he came up with a decent enough lie.

"Never mind," Harry sighed, and rolled back over, facing away. "Will you just tell me if it's something you could have, like Ron's, or it's like mine and you never could?"

Draco stared, and then slowly, as if in a dream, traced his fingers down Harry's tense back- just a trace, before he let the touch fall away. "It's something I never could."

Later that day, Remus pulled Draco aside, to tell him he didn't need to keep making him the Wolfsbane once he left. "I've learned enough from watching you," he said firmly, "That with your suppliers, I should be able to produce it myself."

"I'm still going to brew some, in case yours doesn't work the first few times," Draco said stubbornly. "It would be good to have some stored up for an emergency."

Remus just shook his head, with a look that made Draco hope he really did think he could handle the Wolfsbane on his own, and wasn't just being self-sacrificing. "Twelve OWLs and Quidditch captain, Draco? You'll be lucky if you have time to breathe, let alone make extra potions."

Draco still packed enough supplies so he and Hermione could make one or two rounds, with or without Severus hosting. In some twisted way, he might miss the time he'd spent off doing it secretly with Hermione, with their disloyal ghostly buddy Myrtle floating nearby, making alternately gloomy and perverted comments.

Harry kept his unhappiness about the prefect situation to himself, give him that. Things only became awkward again when Mrs. Weasley unfurled a red banner she had made that read,

CONGRATULATIONS

RON, HERMIONE, AND DRACO

NEW PREFECTS

Draco didn't have the heart to tell her he hadn't been made one and her banner needed revision. It did mean he had to put up with Ginny, Arthur, and Bill Weasley congratulating him, before Sirius, Remus, Tonks, and Shacklebolt did the same at dinner. Even Mad-Eye Moody got in a congratulations Draco had to reject. But at least Moody had an important purpose for being there: getting rid of the Boggart. Or rather, they should have left it to him, but Mrs. Weasley said she would be perfectly fine getting rid of it herself.

She wasn't. Boggarts were such a comical thing in theory, but knowing what you saw wasn't real didn't stop you *seeing* it. And if you were too weak against your own fear, or your fear *was* lethal enough, you simply *couldn't* laugh at it. From the sounds of it, that was what had happened to Mrs. Weasley. She'd had a breakdown over being shown the corpses of her family in succession, before other members of the Order stepped in. Draco wouldn't know, though. He'd run up all three flights of stairs, locked his bedroom door, and put a chair in front of it, the minute he heard the word Boggart. Hermione had to come up and knock to tell him when it was done.

"Oh, Draco," she said fondly, petting his hair as he sat there fretting at just the thought of a Boggart. "Even though you can do a Patronus now, you do still have one weakness, don't you?"

"And Disillusionment charms," Draco panted. "I can't do those either."

Harry had nightmares that night in wake of seeing Mrs. Weasley's Boggart. But on the last night he had the chance to go to Draco's room, he didn't use it. He was just tired and surly like he always seemed these days, as they were told they were to *walk* to Kings Cross. Draco had all kinds of complaints on his tongue, about Malfoys being forced to mingle with the hoi polloi, but Harry's face made him keep them to himself. At least Moody was transporting their baggage for them.

Sirius pulled Draco aside before the walk, the last sight Draco would probably have of him before Christmas. The realization had a sentimentality that Draco would rather not have felt, but he returned Sirius's hug, even as it dragged on incredibly long. When Sirius finally let him go, he seemed unable to express what he was feeling in words, which made it lucky Remus happened along.

"He's going to miss you," Remus translated helpfully, "As will I. Be *careful*, Draco," and enfolded him in another warm hug.

"Here," Draco said once they parted, shoving a package into his hands. "Please send it, alright?" He hadn't been sure whether he was going to just trash it, but at the last second, the feeling of that warmth had been too powerful a reminder of what he had left behind.

"It's just a pair of earrings," he said, when Remus stared stricken at the person it was addressed to. "Earrings with the Black sigil."

They were the most beautiful ones he had found. Beautiful enough to befit Draco's mother.

Remus stared at him for a long moment, then nodded. "I'll send them," he said, and hugged Draco again, before letting him go join the others.

The walk stretched on and on, but finally, they made it to Kings Cross. "Hey, Harry," Tonks said, scanning the platform for Muggles before leading him forward. "I heard you and Draco go through together every year. Why don't you two go after Ron and Ginny?"

"It's fine," Harry muttered, shying away and scowling. "We didn't last summer, he didn't take the train... it's just a stupid childish tradition anyway..."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Harry, *would* you like to go through with me? Please?"

Harry's eyes lit right up. "Okay!" he exclaimed, and practically sprinted over to go through by Draco's side.

Draco's first mission, as always, was to find Luna, but Harry didn't let him out of his sight during the search. Ron and Hermione had left to go be prefects, so Draco was all he had. "We've never actually had a train ride to Hogwarts together," he said stubbornly. "It just keeps not working out... in first year, we never saw you. In second year, you and Ron were fighting

about your fathers fighting, and you bolted. In third year, I passed out from Dementors, and fourth year, you didn't take the Hogwarts Express at all."

"And how exactly is third year *my* fault?" Draco groused, only to stop when they passed the next compartment, throw the door open, throw his arms in the air, and shriek, "COUSIN!"

Neville Longbottom had been sitting beside Luna, speaking intently in her ear, only to leap to his feet red-faced at the sound of Draco's voice. Luna just looked up and gave her patient smile.

"Cousin!" she called in return, lifting her arms, and waggled them until Draco came over and hugged her. "Neville was just telling me about all the plants he's been growing this summer."

"You tell him about testifying at the Sirius Black trial this summer?" Draco drawled. "No offense, Neville, but I think she might have you beat there when it comes to eventful summers."

"Oh, but they were very *tall* plants," Luna said happily, as they all settled in the compartment. Luna insisted Neville finish his stupefyingly dull plant story, which she found fascinating or at least pretended to, while Harry stared broodingly out the window, and Draco wondered why exactly he had thought it a good idea to have befriended Gryffindors.

The train sped on, with an almost suspicious normality to its progression. Neville's plant story ended up livening things up after all, once its climax was reached with the arrival of his exciting new birthday present. He produced the hideous 'Mimbulus mimbletonia' from his bag, which by all appearances seemed to be a cactus that had been infected with the bubonic plague.

Such a bizarre sight was, predictably, like catnip to Luna, who hovered over it excitedly, while Harry's gaze, more worryingly, barely strayed from the window. Luna asked what it did, and her attention seemed to drive Neville to reckless ambitions. He gave Draco his toad Trevor to hold for him with a certain swagger, before getting out a quill and poking the plagued cactus with its tip.

Out exploded the cactus, expelling a dark green liquid out over every inch of the compartment. Draco would have used Ron as a human shield if he had been present, but as it was, he got caught in the face by it, as did Luna, from up closer. The moment Luna gave Neville a little praise, his quill set off an explosion. There was a metaphor there, if one looked closely enough.

Harry hadn't been looking, so only his robes were caught, but the foul-smelling liquid caught the entire back of them. It was an indescribably foul organic odor, something like Draco might imagine Amortentia would smell to a Blast-Ended Skrewt.

"S-sorry," Neville gasped. "I haven't tried that before... didn't realize it would be quite so... don't worry, though, Stinksap's not poisonous..." It had better not be, given that Luna seemed to have ingested a fair quantity.

"Neville," Draco said slowly, "If there is any of this... this Stinksap... in my *hair*..."

"There is, actually," Luna said brightly, "Quite a lot. Please don't curse him, he means well."

"Urgh!" Draco exclaimed, hands flying to his chin-length hair, only to come away full of sap. "Longbottom, you are dangerously close to losing your position as my favorite Gryffindor!"

"Don't worry, there's no harm done," Luna said, and began to apply a fairly good Tergeo charm to the sap over herself, before siphoning off the most obvious sap from the others. Harry was staring at Draco's hair with some of the same dismay Draco felt, but he let out a laugh when Luna raised her wand towards it and Draco dove down in his seat, covering his head with his hands. "Draco, don't be frightened, I'll clean off your hair..."

"The day I let my hair be touched by a *Tergeo* charm," Draco sputtered, "Is the day I retreat from civilization and become a hermit in the Galapagos!"

"Was that an option?" Luna asked mildly. "They do have rather large turtles, don't they?"

"Exactly," Draco said, as Harry conjured a cup before using Aguamenti to fill it with water. He offered it to Draco, and then poured it over Draco's head when he didn't take it.

"Scourgify," Luna cast behind them, and Neville followed suit.

"Oh, you mean so the turtles could be your friends?" Neville asked tentatively.

"No, Neville, because I could *eat* them," Draco explained, "Which is sounding far better by the second- Harry, what *are* you doing with my hair?"

"His best," Luna observed smartly. "Harry, do you want me to take over?"

"No," Harry said firmly, "I'm good with Draco's hair," and let Luna and Neville tend to the majority of the clean-up, getting robes from their suitcases to change into in their place, while he fussed over Draco's sap and now water-logged hair. "I mean, I think I am," he said more softly.

"Harry," Draco said seriously, "I hope you realize, however heroic your intentions, if this ends in me losing my hair, or even having to cut it shorter, you will not only receive Oscausi and Conjunctivitis *together*, I'll tell my godfather he is not *nearly* tough enough on you in Potions class-"

Harry laughed softly, a soft rumbling noise that made Draco's gut clench up at the most unexpected and gross of times. Harry's voice had almost completely finished changing, which was not good for Draco's sanity. "I'm getting it, I'm getting it," he said, and slowly but surely, began to use water and his fingers to hand-wash all of the goop out of Draco's hair.

His fingertips were so soft, and yet felt like they must be leaving marks on the nape of Draco's neck each time they brushed it from how good it felt. Sometimes, it was like Harry had to have cast some enchantment on Draco, for Draco's body to respond to Harry's proximity the way it did, some nasty spell that made Draco's skin positively melt under every touch. But Draco knew from too many years of the same weakness- if he was weak, it was his own fault, and his own secret.

Hermione and Ron showed up about an hour later, to find the four of them clean and changed, but Draco ready to regale them with tales of his inhuman plight. They had a pile of candy awaiting from the trolley, which Ron descended upon like a swarm of locusts, while Hermione reported on the other prefects. Theo was the male Slytherin prefect, while Pansy was the female. Luna commented on how bad a time Ron had given Ravenclaw prefect Padma Patil last Christmas, at which every other occupant of the compartment tried to change the subject at the same time. Not one of them wanted to be reminded of that Yule Ball.

It began to rain outside, which had Draco's nerves on edge, but no Dementors showed up. Instead, they finished out him and Harry's first ever successful full trip to Hogwarts together, upon which Luna gave a rather embarrassing applause for the accomplishment. "Oh, but it is an accomplishment, Draco," she said, wide-eyed. "You're always wandering off such strange places."

"And, er, it was *our* first trip to Hogwarts together," Neville said shyly to Luna, who nodded obliviously. "That was, uh, really nice to sit with you, Luna- I mean, all of you, but..."

"Oh, Harry," Luna said suddenly. "You're going to be able to see the Thestrals now."

Harry was indeed, though arguably he should have been capable long before he ever came to Hogwarts. The hundred stagecoaches each had their pair of Thestrals, with their giant bat-like leathery wings flapping in anticipation of the flight like a waiting mass of shadow. As Draco looked at them with new eyes, imagining how they must strike Harry for the first time, he reflected that their wings beginning to move had the same inky, murky quality in the dusk as the shadow that sometimes came out of his wand.

"What *are* those?" Harry hissed, grabbing onto Draco's arm rather than getting into a stagecoach with the others. He'd already seemed disconcerted by the absence of Hagrid guiding the first-years, though Draco had assured him he'd be back soon enough in, oh, maybe November or so...

"Thestrals, Luna told you," Draco said, trying to pull him in. "Come in, you know what they are, right?"

Pigwidgeon and Crookshanks were twittering and mewling inside their coach, waiting for its final occupants, but Harry stood staring there with a look somewhere between captivated and horrified, transfixed by the outward face of death. He seemed unable to look away from the empty stare the closest was giving him back, its wide vacant white eyes returning Harry's attention before sliding away to focus on nothing.

"I don't," Harry said absently, and Draco reached out and stroked his hand over the creature's nose, like they'd be taught in Care of Magical Creatures this coming year by Hagrid.

"They're just Thestrals," Draco said fondly, having had a far worse relationship with the other large winged creatures in Hagrid's class in the blue loop. "You can see them now because you've seen someone die, that's all. Only people who've seen death can see them. Luna can, because she saw her mother die when she was young. Now are you coming?"

"Because I watched you kill Wormtail?" Harry whispered, and Draco tilted his head at him, giving him a deliberately manic, twisted smirk.

"Yes, you're welcome, Harry. I'll be accepting your gratitude now. Without me, you wouldn't be able to see these beautiful creatures, would you? Never say I didn't open you up to new horizons," he drawled, and hauled Harry bodily inside the carriage before they were left behind.

The Gryffindors spent far too much time worrying needlessly after Hagrid, staring fearfully at the sight of his cabin with its lights out, until Draco lost his patience and told them Hagrid was on a mission to the giants for Dumbledore. "How do you know that?" Neville asked, looking awed.

Draco considered very carefully how much he should trust Neville, before deciding to enough to answer, "I heard Sirius and Remus talking about it." It was actually true. Information he knew from the red line, not the blue, though that didn't keep the others, especially Harry, being cross at him for waiting until now to disclose it.

"What?" Draco said with a shrug. "He's going to be perfectly fine. Come on, are you surprised? What, did you think all that snuggling up to Madame Maxime was just because McGonagall would never give the poor bloke a shot?"

Neville looked further awed. "I hear the most interesting things when I ride along with your cousin," he told Luna.

Whatever ruminations Draco had been undertaking upon the foolhardiness of friendship with Gryffindors, it was still a gut-punch to reach the Great Hall and have to go off to Slytherin alone, while they went to their table together. He smiled at Luna as she went to Ravenclaw, the two glaring outsiders in their houses. He noticed whispers following Harry as he went to his table, and Harry wincing from it, just as they had on the train. Draco got the same treatment, and Harry should be used to attention by now... but only *Draco* was used to that kind of attention, being thought perhaps mad and dangerous, perhaps a murderer, and certainly a liar. Though in this narrative, if lying to protect the man who avenged your parents was wrong, Draco wouldn't want to be right. But still, Harry was going to have to get used to those *probably-a-deranged-killer* stares. Draco had been getting them since second year. It wasn't going to kill anybody.

Draco craned his neck in the direction of Luna and the Gryffindors, waiting for their reactions when they noticed Umbridge up there in her fluffy pink cardigan at the high table, an eyesore in the first degree. His attention was caught by the feeling of closer eyes on him, or rather on the little Astaroth around his neck. Theo looked pleased to see Draco wearing the necklace he'd returned. Draco smirked up at him, wiggling the charm in his direction, and manfully resisted the urge to brag to Theo that this was the form his Patronus had taken. Instead, his attention was pulled by Blaise's casual greeting, and somewhat less casual teasing that Theo had been made a prefect and Draco hadn't.

"Oh, no, Blaise," Draco laughed, "Have you and Theo fallen out? Do you really want to remind me of that, for Theo's sake? See, Theo," he said, leaning forward putting on a faux-menacing face. "I learned something very interesting about you this summer. Very interesting indeed..."

"Oh, spare me," Theo sighed, looking nervous, although still quite fetching.

Just as in the blue loop, the summer before fifth year had been Theo's time to start standing out. Puberty had hit Theodore Nott like a runaway freight train. Draco could finally remember why he had used to stare at Theo during boring classes for his own entertainment, with that dark blond hair sleek and feathery around his face, dark blue eyes set under graceful rounded brows, and expressive lips fuller than any girl in their year. Those lips were drawn taut now in tension, for what might await him as punishment for the green and silver P badge on his collar.

Draco had all his yearmates' attention as he delivered his smugly anticlimactic conclusion. "I've heard," he said after his dramatic pause, "That you intend to try out for Chaser this year."

Theo went back to looking vaguely bored. "Oh, yeah..."

"Seriously?" Blaise asked, nudging him with his elbow. "What, because Draco's become captain? Did your dad make you, to suck up to him? There'd be easier ways to win *Draco's* regard, Theodore. Draco, how did you even hear?"

"Ran into Mr. Nott at the Ministry, did he tell you?"

Tracey Davis couldn't resist sticking her nose in. "At the Ministry of Magic?" she asked breathlessly. "Was it when you were there for the trial of Sirius Black?" She looked at Millie and Pansy too, who drew closer to Draco in smug excitement.

All of their yearmates, and many other Slytherins around them, looked full of excitement at the mention. Whatever politics or loyalties might dictate their opinion *should* be on the Black case, no one could keep from feeling a natural curiosity, at what had been the biggest news story in Wizarding Britain that summer. They had the satisfaction of making them wait before giving them anything, as the time for Sorting came. The Hat had a pushy little song, advising unity over division, in which case, Draco whispered to Theo, it would make itself obsolete. Draco would happily offer it a Lacarnum inflamari to put it out of its misery.

He and Millie and Pansy did oblige their yearmates with the story of Sirius's trial once the food had been served. It was fun being the center of attention throughout, until the meal ended and Dumbledore got up to speak. Draco knew the interruption by Umbridge would not be long in coming, but this time, instead of enjoying the old man's disconcertion, the sight of Umbridge just made his blood boil. He couldn't believe he had actually scurried around being her toady, feeling all self-important as a member of her Inquisitorial Squad. Sometimes, he wished he could go back to the blue loop just to punch his old self in his prancing pureblood teeth.

He snorted out loud when Umbridge dropped the line, "Progress for progress's sake must be discouraged." She was less subtle than *Father* when it came to these things. She might as well have rented one of those neon Muggle signs to hang flashing over her head reading FASCISM FOR FUN AND PROFIT.

Hermione looked shaken up by the speech, more than smart enough to have picked up the sinister undertones. But before Draco could catch her, she had to go off and usher a lot of first-years. Gryffindor had truly outdone itself in this year's crop, more turnip-faced and snot-nosed than ever. Merlin, it was trying to only have two intellectual friends.

He ignored said other intellectual friend's tentatively reproachful stare as he cut away from the other Slytherins and went down towards the kitchens. As if Theo would have the nerve to discipline Draco, whether or not he actually wanted a spot on the Quidditch team. Being prefect might be more trouble than it was worth for Theo, for whom trying to restrain *Draco Malfoy* would be like emptying out a flooding boat with a thimble. And however helpful Theo had been to Draco last year, and however pretty he was getting, Draco had no intention of letting Theo exercise any of the same methods of, well... *restraint* that he had in the blue loop. The only hands Draco intended to have on him again in the near future, perhaps ever again, were his own.

And after Harry Potter's hands in his hair for a solid twenty minutes, dealing with the aftermath of Neville's plant, Draco would need the use of those hands tonight.

First, though, off to see if Dobby had made any elf friends.

The good news was, Dobby had, elves called Wooky and Nissy who were brother and sister. They had been freed from the Parkinsons a number of years ago, for helping Pansy's older sister steal from her parents, and ended up at Hogwarts- unpaid, of course. They'd bonded with Dobby by gossiping over their Slytherin ex-employers, even if they all had to fight against the need they felt to punish themselves for it.

The bad news was, the rumor had since gone around that Dobby was being paid by yet another employer to do work on the side, the notorious Sirius Black, and in a flash, Dobby had elf friends no longer. Wooky and Nissy could be seen together with the other elves cleaning up after the dinner, shooting Dobby and Draco the same dirty looks as the rest of them.

"How would they even know?" Draco complained. "I mean, yeah, you won't tell me your living situation. You're sure *you* didn't tell them? Maybe they saw you coming and going, but how did they hear it was Grimmauld? Let alone that you were doing paid work there for us?"

Dobby looked shifty. "Dobby does not want to cause any more disputes," he said, which meant he knew full well how word had spread.

"*Dobby*," said Draco, and Dobby nervously checked the watch Draco had made him.

"Er," Dobby said, "Dobby is very busy tonight, Draco Malfoy. Dobby must run-"

"Dobby," Draco whined, "You're going to make me die of curiosity."

After a great deal more whining, Draco managed to coax out of Dobby the identity of the snitch, who had ruined Dobby's chances once more of having a harmonious existence with the other elves: Kreacher. Apparently, even in different households, the network of gossip between elves could be as fierce as gossiping humans if they exerted themselves. And from the sound of it, Kreacher had, as he rarely did at anything other than hiding Black heirlooms from the hated Sirius Black. Draco regretted every nice thought he'd ever had about that old bastard for his help with the antiques.

"I'll kill him," Draco said grimly. "I'll go back to Grimmauld for Christmas and hang him from the rafters by his own entrails. Or no, we took down all the house elf heads from the walls, but for that loathsome worm, I'll make an exception. Don't worry, Dobby, I'll decapitate him slowly. Alright, maybe I'll put his *head* on the wall, but I'll hang the *rest* of his corpse from the rafters-"

"Dobby was afraid of this!" Dobby protested. "Dobby did not want to cause anyone trouble! Not Draco Malfoy or Kreacher! Kreacher is not a bad elf! He does as he was taught! He is faithful to his old masters. Do not punish him, Draco Malfoy!"

"Okay, fine," Draco sighed, "But next chance I get, him and I are definitely having a talking-to, alright? He shouldn't be spreading secrets around from his household, even to other elves. I mean, that's against any house elf code of conduct, right?" Dobby nodded, and they eased back into more pleasant subjects, like the minutiae of the Black trial, and how all the elves already held an instinctual distrust towards Umbridge.

He must have spent longer than he realized talking to Dobby, because they were interrupted finally not by another elf but a human. "Draco," the voice said, and it was not nearly lilting and cutting enough to be Severus's, the only person Draco would have thought could have the temerity to come drag him out of here. "Draco, you have to come to bed with me, it's well past curfew."

Draco looked up and saw Theo standing over them anxiously. He hadn't known Theo knew how to get into the kitchens, but in his experience, Theo *was* skilled into getting into places you wouldn't think he'd belong. Or fit. "Oh, no, have I displeased the great dread prefect of Slytherin House? Look, Dobby, Theo is impatient for me to *come to bed with him*."

"I- I didn't mean it that way," Theo stammered, as Dobby failed to hide his amusement. "Come on, Draco, please, seriously..."

He began to pull Draco up by the hand, but Draco didn't walk with him, giving him a severe look. Theo was tall again, more than half a head over him, but it didn't keep him from making Theo wilt with a mere look. "Aren't you forgetting something?" Theo looked blank. "You interrupted my conversation with my friend here. Aren't you going to introduce yourself and apologize?"

Theo looked like he thought Draco had finally gone round the bend, but he said anyway, "Hello there, my name is Theo, sorry to interrupt..."

"My name is Dobby," Dobby said, eyeing him skeptically. "Goodnight, Theodore Nott." Of course Dobby knew Theo's name, and of course the sound of him knowing it made Theo visibly suppress a shudder. "Goodnight, Draco Malfoy. Dobby is sorry if Dobby got you in trouble..."

"Oh, no, Theo would never give me detention," Draco drawled, throwing an arm around Theo's shoulders as they headed out. "Theo and I are too *close*, aren't we, Theo?"

Theo pulled himself away from Draco's arm as soon as they were alone, glaring down at him with real disquiet. "You do need to stop that, Draco, if we *are* to really be friends. We're too old for those- those jokes. I know you think it's funny, but someday someone might actually think-"

"If you don't want me to joke that you fancy me, Theo," Draco said equably, beginning the climb up the stairs, "Then stop acting like you fancy me. What?" Theo had remained at the base.

"I need to tell you something, alright?" Theo said heavily, and that explained the unusual initiative taken in going after Draco in the kitchens. Draco's first hope was that Theo had found something out about the talon wand over the break. But if he had, he would have led with that, coolly smug in his own unimpeachable cleverness, rather than this uncomfortable skulking.

Draco smirked, looking down from his higher step. "Why, Theo, you couldn't have found a more romantic setting to confess your love for me?"

"No!" Theo groaned, seeming dangerously close to losing his cool, when normally he kept his cards closer to his chest than anyone Draco had ever met. Draco had used to count every time he could make Theo blow up as a personal victory. "Draco, it's about the Quidditch team."

That made Draco stop walking. "Are you not trying out? If it's just your father making you-"

"It's not," Theo said, fidgeting where he stood still at the foot of the stairs. "You know I like Quidditch. My father just always forbade me from playing. Said I needed to concentrate on my studies." That, Draco hadn't known in the blue loop. "He gave his permission this year because you're the captain, and apparently we're trying to get in with you again... for some reason, but I wasn't overly displeased. I just don't know how well that's going to go now."

"Theo," Draco said, rolling his eyes and descending to his step, "I guarantee you, if you're not the best choice for Chaser, I will not put you on the team, end of-"

"Are you really going to let girls try out for the team?" Theo asked, and Draco shrugged.

"Why not? We always played together when we were kids, how is this-"

"'Why not?' Draco, you're normally cleverer than this. Do you really think everyone is going to be okay with that? Especially if you have Millie replace Bletchley at Keeper like you clearly want to?" Theo crossed his arms, looking unhappily into the shadows. "It's not

officially against the rules anywhere, I checked, but it's not *officially* against the rules for Muggleborns to get Sorted into Slytherin either, is it? But they never are. And girls are never on our team. It's just how things are done, and if you break it, I'm not sure the other players..."

"Theo, have you heard something?" Draco frowned, and Theo shrugged noncommittally.

"You should have figured this much already from common sense, or you *have* been spending too much time with Gryffindors, and forgotten how things work in *our* house," Theo said, looking away. His prefect badge glimmered in the torchlight along with his hair, but half his face was cast in dense shadow. "Objectively, I know Millie would make a far better Keeper than Bletchley. Salazar knows *I'd* rather be on a team with her than that mentally challenged half-Squib. But he's friends with Montague, Pucey, Warrington... They already aren't happy, they thought Montague would be captain. If you get rid of Bletchley, you might lose his friends with him."

Draco felt a wave of uneasiness go through him. "You're being serious, aren't you? But what am I supposed to do, Theo? I already told Millie she should try out, and tryouts are tomorrow. Pansy might show up too. Other girls, even. What am I supposed to do, tell them all not to come now, I've changed my mind, chauvinism reigns once more?"

"If you have to let them try out, do it," Theo said thoughtfully. "Just don't put them on the actual team, or we won't *have* a team, Draco. Traditions like this are stupid, but that doesn't mean they aren't tradition. And you... you already don't follow so many. If you stop following *any*-"

"Then what, Theo? What, you'll all murder me in my sleep?"

"We could never do that, Draco," Theo said soothingly, and Draco thought he meant for sentimental reasons, before he explained, "You always keep your curtains charmed shut."

Neapolitanism

Chapter Notes

Hello all! Check out this beautiful art of Sirius's trial by Tan_1412!!! -heart eyes-

Anyway, enjoy! <3

Playlist

The minute Draco walked into their first Potions lesson the next morning, he could tell there was something wrong with the Gryffindors. He'd been counting on a nice gentle start to the term, with Charms and then Potions on his first morning giving him two of his best subjects right away. But Double Potions seemed to be double trouble. When he went over before Severus's arrival to greet Seamus and Neville, some tips for brewing a draught of peace readied, Seamus jumped away hastily enough to nearly knock over Parvati Patil. "What?" Draco asked blankly. "I'm not *really* going to seek vengeance against Neville for his plant. As you can see, my hair is as glorious as ever-"

"Come back here, Frankenstein, you're scaring them," Hermione hissed, and dragged Draco back to his cauldron next to hers.

"Why?" Draco whined. "I wasn't rumored of casting any Dark Marks all summer!"

"There was a fight in the boys' dorm last night," she hissed, gesturing towards Harry as if she expected his face to tell the whole story. Harry did look pretty gloomy, but that was par for the course these days. "Seamus doesn't believe him about the Dark Lord being back. He's mad because his mum didn't want him to even come back to Hogwarts, because people think Harry's a nutter who killed a man. So Harry said some things about Seamus's mother... apparently it all escalated..."

"And what?" Draco sighed. "Seamus thinks he's getting Langlocked again for it?"

"If you're going to curse everyone saying things about Harry," Hermione whispered, "You're going to have to curse half the school. Lavender was saying it last night too, I screamed at her."

Draco smirked proudly. "I can imagine it a daily effort *not* to scream at Lavender Brown. Sharing a dorm with her at the best of times has to be the equivalent of Chinese water torture."

"It's so many people," Hermione said worriedly. "We passed some fourth-year Ravenclaws on the way here from History of Magic, and they fled from us in the corridor! Like Harry was going to do something to them!"

"Well," Draco said with a grin, "You're in luck, you lot. It just so happens you have a best friend who's a specialist at this sort of thing-"

"Draco, I don't think going on a Langlock spree is going to fix anything-"

"I don't mean *that*, Striker, I mean I know what it's like for people to flee from me-"

"Professor Snape is here!" Pansy hissed over at them, and they fell silent.

"Settle down," Severus said coldly, and had the classroom obey so quickly, they could all hear the sound of the door shutting behind him. "Before we begin today's lesson, I think it appropriate to remind you that next June you will be sitting an important examination, during which you will prove how much you have learned about the composition and use of magical potions. Moronic though some of this class undoubtedly are, I expect you to scrape an 'Acceptable' in your OWL, or suffer my... displeasure."

Severus was giving Neville a look that made it clear who he thought the weak link would be. Draco tried to shoot Neville a reassuring look, having promised himself in writing to help drag Neville through all this. But Neville was watching Severus in transfixed horror instead. All Draco got was an uneasy stare back from Seamus. Draco couldn't blame Neville, though. Severus *was* his Boggart, wasn't he? From that perspective, in his shoes, Draco would be doing far worse.

He imagined a class taught by Aunt Bella, and barely suppressed a shudder.

"After this year, of course, many of you will cease studying with me," Severus continued, with no foreknowledge that he would have ceased teaching potions by then. "I take only the very best into my NEWT Potions class, which means that some of us will certainly be saying goodbye." He stared at Harry then, and Draco felt a prickling of disaster at the back of his neck, at the recklessly defiant way Harry stared back at him. With each of them being directed to use their individual cauldrons, this time, broken off from their partners, that simmering malice bode very ill for Harry's chances of focusing on something this hard.

Severus gave them an hour and a half to brew the draught of peace, which all of Draco's friends knew to be one of the anti-anxiety potions Draco regularly took. Once or twice, he had shared a vial with them. At least they didn't all gape at him when it was mentioned. The potion was difficult enough for them to be preoccupied with struggling to make it, and in many cases, failing.

Hermione was impressed by Draco's dedication to this lesson, taking out his fifth notebook and writing every minutiae he could pick up, as well as a copy of the recipe proper from the board. Her attempts to whisper about their friends as usual during Potions were met only with silent concentration. "I want to start brewing this myself," Draco whispered at her quizzical look, "And the angel's infusion and calming draughts, so Severus doesn't always have to keep

making them for me. With Remus handling the Wolfsbane back at Grimmauld, I should have time."

"Should you, though?" Hermione whispered skeptically, familiar with the insanity of the schedule Draco had set himself this year, but turned to her potion with renewed attention herself.

When Severus said their potion should have a light silver vapor rising from it, both he and Hermione had a pretty silver mist coming off as instructed, but they were two of the only ones. Only a few students looked the right track on the Slytherin side, with everyone else's smoke a darker gray, and Hermione seemed to be the one Gryffindor with any luck. Harry's smoke was so gray it was almost charcoal, and steaming quite ominously. Ron couldn't keep his flame going properly, and Draco didn't even have the heart to glance in the direction of Neville's. His usual attempts at intervention to help Neville had been forestalled by Seamus's cauldron between theirs, with Seamus jerking away in terror and distracting everyone the moment Draco neared.

Severus came over and gave Harry a hard time for his subpar potion, which Harry deserved in truth, having somehow *forgotten the syrup of hellebore.* Draco was so appalled, it made him seriously question himself for his continued attraction to this *person*.

Where was the anti-anxiety function without the *hellebore*? It wasn't even a draught of peace then! Just a *draught of,* if that! Draco's mind whirled as Severus Vanished the contents of Harry's cauldron, though Hermione was also right to point out that many of the attempts looked worse than Harry's, and they hadn't been Vanished.

Draco made a face as he brought up a flagon with his name to Severus's desk. From the look of the other flagons, his hopes that Severus's supply of viable draught of peace would be sizably augmented by this lesson had been hilariously over-optimistic. At least Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw should be having this lesson in their own class, and one should theoretically be able to count on at least one or two of the Ravenclaws to do it right. Harry seemed not slow to notice the injustice against himself, and stormed out of the dungeons before anyone else.

Draco lingered beside Severus's desk even once everyone else had gone. "Sir..." He had never stood up for Harry with Severus, especially in a case as egregious as forgetting the syrup of hellebore, but Harry had also almost never seemed as down as he did these days. "I was wondering..."

"Your potion looks competent, vain boy," Severus said without looking over, inspecting Blaise's with a frown. "And I will have to test. But from the eye test, I would not scruple to give you vials of... hmm, Granger's, Bulstrode's, Nott's, and perhaps Greengrass's to take." It seemed Blaise's was no good after all, as Severus put it down with a sneer. "Were you hoping to carry some off with you right away? I would have hoped your supply would not be so depleted yet..."

"No, it's not that, sir," Draco said, shifting from foot to foot. Severus's gaze focused on him analytically, before he rolled his eyes with the utmost contempt.

"Don't tell me," Severus said impatiently, "That you are here to plead the case of your incompetent *sweetheart*, Draco, or I may contaminate *all* these draughts of peace by expelling my very unpeaceful *bile*." Draco didn't say anything, and Severus rolled his eyes again. "Do you think I was harsh, Vanishing his potion, while leaving that road sludge produced by Longbottom to continue being a blight upon the world?" Draco nodded tentatively. "Longbottom does not wish to become an *Auror,* does he?"

"Yeah, no," Draco said with a helpless smile, "I don't think that would turn out well for, like, literally anyone involved. You mean because you won't take anything less than an O for Potions next year, sir, and Harry will need a Potions NEWT to become an Auror?" Ron might want to be an Auror as well, but Draco wasn't about to give Severus that excuse to come down harder on Ron too.

"Harshness towards Potter has become *useful*," Severus said dryly, "Since in my four years of experience teaching him, nothing but harshness seems to motivate Potter to bestir himself to much effort in Potions." Maybe Harry wouldn't hate the subject so much if Severus hadn't always picked on him. But the damage was too far done to take back now.

"Potter seems to have taken the new negative turn in his press coverage most unduly to heart. As if it matters what anyone says of you, save in how it will affect the things they *do* to you. The future will not wait, and the OWL examination board will not magically grant him Os across the board, simply because he is Harry Potter and he was called unstable in the Daily Prophet. Of which, incidentally, I fail to see the *inaccuracy*. If you were planning to pay a visit to your old friend Skeeter over these reports, Draco, I would advise you..."

Skeeter's fear of Draco had seemed maintained since their meeting last year, but Harry was too juicy a topic for her to avoid just for his sake. At least she had kept Draco's name out of it. "No, Severus, I won't interfere there again. I just... it's not just the press. It's making half the school treat him like a pariah, even the Gryffindors..."

"A poor excuse," Severus said coolly. "*You* were treated as worse than a pariah for most of your *second* year, and did your marks slip *once*? Draco, if your beloved Potter is not tough enough to handle criticism, he is not tough enough to be an Auror."

Draco made his way to lunch late and well-chastened. It was hard not to agree with Severus on some points, although he had the feeling he'd articulated himself badly. He often had that with Severus, who could talk Draco around in knots even on his best day. Nor was Draco's own mood improved by Theo's insistent whispers during both lunch and dinner about whether Draco would tell the girls they couldn't come to tryouts after all. "They might not show up anyway," was all Draco said back, and resolutely ignored Theo for his favorite pastime of staring at Harry.

Theo's fears proved correct. By the time tryouts were due to start at 7:30 that night, there was of course the longtime Slytherin Keeper there, the eternally sixth-year Miles Bletchley. He'd

arrived with the other holdovers from the team in past years: the slow-moving, bulky Cassius Warrington, big hairy-armed Graham Montague, and the also hulking but still unspeakably gorgeous dark-haired Adrian Pucey. Theo arrived soon after with Blaise in tow, as well as Vince and Greg. Vince and Greg were due to try out for Beaters and were natural shoo-ins for the roles, along with some third-year boys who looked little more promising than Blaise. It was a good thing Blaise was mediocre at Quidditch, because even if he had been a prodigy, Draco would have been hard-pressed not to leave him off the team for fear of a two-captain situation.

It didn't look like any girls were going to show up, and Draco hated himself for the cowardly part of him that was grateful for that. But then Millie flew up on a new Nimbus 2001, and the other girls were not slow in coming after her: Pansy, Tracey, both Greengrass sisters, and a pair of broad-shouldered second-year girls who looked to either be twins or conspiring very energetically to appear so. Draco could hear the sixth and seventh-year boys laugh at each girl's arrival. It annoyed but perplexed him as it kept up, until he realized: his old teammates expected him to send all the girls away before tryouts began.

"Alright, everyone, form up!" Draco instructed, lifting up into the air, and everyone rose to hover before him. He'd been through a double share of Slytherin tryouts in the two timelines, so he had the script that Flint and then Montague had followed firmly in his head to adhere to. "Everyone warmed up?"

"Yeah," Montague sneered, "Parkinson's done her little oop-de-oops," and somehow that made not just the older years but also Vince and Greg giggle like it was the height of wit.

"Okay," Draco said, forcing a smile, and began the speech he had drafted in his head for the occasion. "So, the last time Slytherin played a full season of Quidditch, we won all three matches, but lost the Quidditch Cup. If nothing else, that shows us something was going on tactically that-"

"Aren't you going to bin off the bints?" Montague interrupted.

"I'm sorry," Draco snapped, "*What*?"

"Only the boys are actually trying out, right?" Pucey called, before shooting a dirty look over at Pansy. From what Draco had seen, she hadn't treated him overly attentively, in their one date at the Heart of Winter Gala in third year. "Parkinson, you all can go fly over to the stands and cheer us on, if you like. Maybe you can make more of the blokes some signs."

Draco glanced reflexively at Blaise, but somehow, he just hovered there letting Pucey take that tone with his girlfriend, not protesting. And Draco could never get Blaise to shut up. "There's no official rule that girls aren't allowed to play on the Slytherin team. Anyone can try out who's second-year or up, that's the rule. So anyway, as I was saying-"

"You're seriously letting them try out with us?" Warrington interrupted.

"You've got to be kidding me," Montague sneered. "Oh, yeah, that's the thing to get Slytherin winning again. More *vaginas*."

"Okay, that's it," Draco snapped, temper cracking. "Everyone, back on the ground, now!"

Everyone floated back down, some of the younger girls looking visibly upset. "Listen to me," Draco snapped. "*I* am the Slytherin captain. If you want to play for Slytherin, that means following my rules-"

"Because your godfather's Head of House," Montague snapped. "I would be captain if it weren't for neapolitanism-"

"Oh, bloody hell, Montague, the word is nepotism, he's not from *Naples*!" Millie growled. "If you're going to be a prick, at least get the vocabulary right!"

"Shut up, you-"

Draco did not want to hear what he would call Millie if left unchecked. "Say what you want. Maybe it's that Professor Snape is, yes, my godfather, although that didn't make him make me a *prefect,* if you haven't noticed, so maybe nepotism doesn't reign in everything. And yes, Graham, for the record, the word you're searching for *is* nepotism. It means the awarding of positions based not on merit but by personal connection. Except if we're going to talk merit, maybe I'm the captain because I'm the first Seeker in a decade to catch the Snitch all *three* games, and *you* lot are the ones who couldn't rack up enough points otherwise for that to *win* us the cup!"

Draco's verbal barrage silenced them all, male and female, leaving him smirking in satisfaction. "Very well. Now that we've gotten that straight, as I was saying, I *am* the captain. And while I'm captain, you get on the team if you're good enough to help us win, that's all. If you're scared you're going to lose your positions to the girls, gentlemen, that has a simple solution- *play better than them*!"

"It's not that we're scared!" Bletchley bellowed, face flushing an interesting sort of puce. "Not of a bunch of *girls*! It's just tradition!"

"Yeah," Pucey snapped, looking less attractive by the second. "We don't appreciate you flaunting tradition like this! Even if there's not an *official* rule, *everyone* knows girls aren't on Slytherin. We know *you* don't care about tradition, Malfoy, but this is too far. You've spent so much time with Gryffindors like that Mud- that Granger- it's like you're not even a Slytherin anymore-"

"On the contrary," Draco seethed, "I am being *extremely* Slytherin. It's moronic to just take half of our house and leave them out of the talent pool for some arbitrary old rules. If having more possibilities for our team makes us *win,* then fuck the rules! I won't put any of the girls on the team if they aren't good enough-"

"Bullshit!" Montague snapped.

"Excuse me?" Draco said, hand itching to go towards his wand pocket.

"You heard me!" Montague exclaimed. "Bullshit!"

Draco cast a look at Theo, wondering if he would say a word on either side. But Theo was just looking down at his feet.

"Yeah," Bletchley blustered. "Everyone knows what's going on here. Your uncle's trial!"

Nothing of the ignorance his old teammates had been spouting had surprised him, but that came out of left field. "What?"

"Malfoy," Pucey snapped, "Everyone knows that Bulstrode and Parkinson testified at your uncle's trial. You promised them places on the team in exchange, didn't you?" The other boys were nodding in agreement. "Miles didn't even want to bother showing up, when you've already traded his position away to help some Gryffindor blood traitor-"

"ARE YOU ALL MAD?" Draco bellowed. "Who told you that? It's nonsense-"

"It's so bloody obvious, Malfoy," Montague sneered. "Don't think you're fooling anyone. There's no *other* reason to let girls on the team."

"Yeah," Warrington said confidently, "It's Neapolitanism."

"Listen," Draco growled, "You're wrong, but it doesn't matter. I am the captain, and that's not going to change. For everyone who's tired of all this whining and carrying on like a bunch of first-year *Hufflepuffs*, tryouts are starting *now.* So you can either fall in line or you can fuck off! You know the way back to the castle!" He gestured wildly in that direction, not expecting anyone to leave.

But Bletchley did. Montague followed, and then Warrington, and then Pucey, and then the third-year boys, and a moment later, Vince and Greg. Greg said something to Blaise, and then he and, yes, even Theo began to walk off with them, a mass of tall broad-shouldered shadows leaving them in the fading light. In an instant, it was only Draco and the girls left standing there.

"You're all a bunch of fucking cowards!" Pansy yelled after them.

"Or maybe," Pucey yelled, whirling back to glare at them, "I have better things to do than hang out with a stupid little cunt like you!"

Draco's hand went to his wand pocket, but Pansy was quicker. "Conjunctivo!" she yelled, but Pucey dodged, as if this was not the first time he had been on the receiving end of that curse from her. Then he bolted, and all the other boys with him.

It was an effort for Draco to keep his breathing steady then, and more of one to keep his face even as he turned back to the girls. "Alright, then. Now that the rubbish has taken itself out-"

"Draco, are you mad?" Millie sighed. "You have to get them back."

"We have enough people here for a team," Draco said defensively, wanting to stick behind the threat he'd made, but none of the girls looked fond of that idea.

"Draco," Millie said, rubbing her eyes, "None of us here have played a *day* of Quidditch at Hogwarts, besides you. If we lose all the boys but you..." She looked around uneasily. "I mean, for one, who will play Beater? Are *any* of you girls trying out for Beater?" There was an awkward, prolonged silence.

"Why did you tell us to try out," one of the second-year girls whined, "If you hadn't gotten the boys on side with it yet? I thought everything would be okay! They were so mad at us!"

"Thank you, Draco, but I don't think this is going to work out, I'm sorry," said Daphne Greengrass, and then together, all the girls marched away from him too.

Draco sank to the ground on the Quidditch pitch once they were gone, thinking it couldn't possibly have gone worse. But then the last factor came into play, and Draco should have seen it coming: Harry Potter striding down from the edge of the Hufflepuff stands, right by the wall in the shadow where he could be hidden. Draco should have known. It wasn't like it was the first time. Or the fifth, for that matter.

"Are you kidding me?" Draco yelled furiously. "You're not spying on Slytherin practices anymore, stalker, not as long as I'm captain!"

Harry had the grace not to point out that at this rate, that might not be very long after all. "I heard everything that happened," Harry said, sitting down beside Draco and his broom with a sigh. "That was really brave, Draco, what you did."

"You mean stupid," Draco spat, picking at the grass beneath him venomously, before throwing a patch down at his own feet. "You see anyone else here *with* me?"

"You can get them back, can't you?" Harry said confidently. "The girls, at least. You did that for them. And some of the boys, definitely. The ones in your year, you've known them all your life."

"Why is that I try to do what only makes *sense*," Draco groaned, "And everyone around me acts like I've gone mad?"

Harry snorted in agreement, bracing his hands behind himself as he stared up into the crisp dusk. That lean, muscular body stretched beside Draco was a promise of possible comfort it was difficult to resist touching. Even just touching Harry's hand felt it would make Draco's failure more bearable. But he couldn't, all because of rules he'd imposed on himself.

"So my options," Draco groaned, "Are either give up the captaincy, or try and threaten the boys into coming back. And it won't work. They know that even I won't curse them just because they won't play *Quidditch* with me, I'm not *five*." Not boys with Death Eater fathers, at least. He smiled bleakly to himself at the memory of Pucey's panicked face as he dodged Pansy's curse, the one highlight of this dismal evening. Then he shot a sneaky look back at Harry, eyes drawing slowly from his toes to his forehead, and had to scowl again seeing how Harry was smiling.

"No wonder you seem happier," Draco scoffed. "Watching your prime Quidditch rival imploding. You must think you've already got the cup in the bag, don't you?" Draco felt his hair flying in his eyes in the night breeze, and pushed it away in irritation. He must have been more nervous than he realized for these tryouts, to have forgotten to put it up.

"It's not that," said Harry, and was merciful enough to be the one to reach out and touch Draco, pushing some of his hair out of his eyes and behind his ears for him. The feeling of his fingertips against Draco's scalp had the same addictive quality he remembered, the same sensation of pure magic waiting there right at the end of his fingers. As much as Draco could want, if only he asked for it.

"I think you underestimate yourself. I bet you could talk your *yearmates* into coming back, at least. You can be really persuasive when you want to be."

"By persuasive, you mean what?" Draco rolled his eyes. "Threats? Bribery? Sexual favors?"

"No, I don't- Draco, what? No, definitely not- God!" Harry exclaimed, turning that adorable beet red and jolting back from Draco. "I just mean... I don't know..."

Draco shot Harry a sideways look. "I heard you got in trouble today in Defense. That cow Umbridge gave you detention for speaking the truth about the graveyard, didn't she?" He fussed with his own hair again, afflicted by that nasty feeling he could do nothing right. "It really did screw you over, the only other witness and the actual murderer being *me.* Who no one can trust, nobody, so having me stand up beside you telling the truth too would just make it even worse." He took a deep breath. "Are you cross at me for not cursing Seamus yet? I totally will if you want-"

"Draco," Harry said dryly, "You're just offering cause you're cross at the other Slytherins and want to curse somebody." When Draco glared at him, he raised his hands. "Hey, hey, not that I'm offering to be the target either! And- it's okay, Draco, really. I'm not scared of Umbridge."

Draco shot a quick glance at Harry's hands, still unmarked. He remembered the Black Quill she used on Harry during detention. He remembered the scar it left, up until the day that hand was offering Draco his wand back outside the courtroom. She had showed it off to her Inquisitorial Squad, and Draco had cackled, though it had sent an uneasy feeling through his stomach even back then. Now the thought of the likes of her rending Harry's flesh made him want to curse someone a thousand times more. "You should be, Harry. See, your problems are too big to be worrying about mine."

"But I love playing Quidditch against you," Harry wheedled, green eyes brimming with sincerity as he leaned forward. "It's the best thing in the world. Draco, you can't give up. At least try, before stomping off to your godfather, okay? Promise me you'll try. And don't just go in screaming at your friends. You can charm them somehow, you're smarter than that- except, um, not the, uh, the way you said, not the bribery or the... uh, the... yeah."

"Okay," Draco said grudgingly. "I'll try."

He arrived in the dorms to find his four dormmates sat together in a huddle in front of their beds, all of their wands out resting on their knees, with faces like they were trying to gather themselves to face death with grace. From the way Vince immediately flung himself to Draco's feet, begging for forgiveness, it seemed at least one of their number was failing at it.

Draco stared down at Vince in dull dismay. "What are you doing? If you didn't agree with the older boys, why did you leave with them? Or is it that you did agree with them, and now you're just scared of what I'll do to you?"

Peer pressure was a powerful thing, but fear could be the most powerful motivator of all. On one level, Draco supposed he had to be impressed they'd all had the nerve to openly defy him, however much they might regret it now. "Is it your fathers?" Draco asked, dropping to sit with them in their circle as just another member. "Are you worried what they'll think if you play on a team with girls? Don't think I don't understand that."

The other boys exchanged glances. None of them put their wands back, which left Draco the only one with his still in his pocket. It put him on edge, but he kept it that way. Merlin, it was hard to play the diplomat. "It's not that," Theo said slowly, taking the lead when it seemed no one else had the nerve. "I don't think they'd be upset. *My* father told me to get closer to you this year, to try and make *you* happy. Everyone knows how... how important you are, Draco, it's just..."

"It's just what everyone in *Slytherin* will say," Blaise finished bluntly for him.

"You know," Draco said slowly, "Someone just recently told me that it doesn't matter what anyone says of you, save in how it will affect the things they do to you."

Blaise snorted and pocketed his wand. Draco watched it go back out of sight like a fleeting glimpse of hope. "Says the one who curses people mute for talking shit about you."

Fair enough. "I said I was told that," Draco said mildly. "Never said I was any good at living by it. But for the record, nobody's going to be saying *shit* about us if we *win.* Nothing succeeds like *success*, boys. You can't argue with it. Those washed-up old has-beens too scared to compete with girls for their places? They'll just be watching from the sidelines while it's *us* to lift the cup-"

"Why should we stick our necks out like that for you?" Greg asked suspiciously. "Just on the off-chance we could win? Maybe?"

"You don't even like us," Vince said sulkily. "Theo's the only one you really talk to. And that's just cause you think he's fit."

Four years of freezing out his old pureblood friends, save somewhat Theo, were coming back to haunt him, as he should have known they eventually would. "It's not that. And it's not that I don't like *you*, Vince. I just don't like what you *think.* You all think my best friend's a worthless Mudblood." Maybe Draco was taking this too deep, but he could try honesty, for *once*. "I can't relax around you, because I know you all think I'm a blood traitor, and I'm always worried what you'll write back about me to your parents, and they'll tell my father..."

"You don't live with your father anymore, though," Theo said softly, dark blue eyes a distressing piece of loveliness, for the threat of pity held in them. "Do you."

"No," Draco said, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath against his own anger. "No, I don't."

"So what you're describing," Blaise said calmly, "Is not a personal dislike, but an ideological chasm." Vince and Greg looked confused. "He's saying he didn't stop being friends with us because he hates us. He's saying he stopped because he knew we wouldn't hold with him running around with all those Gryffindors."

"Listen," Draco said heavily, "I know I changed a lot, okay? I know I've been a different person at Hogwarts than I was before it. But I had to be, after I got this wand." He took the risk of drawing it and panicking them, but they all seemed to understand. Theo knew more about it than the others, but their gazes all went just as grave as his. "You all know whose it is. What it's done. Of course getting this wand changed me. It picked me and I couldn't get rid of it. I couldn't replace it. I've tried loads of times."

Theo's pretty lips twitched. Draco remembered telling Theo once he *wouldn't* get rid of it if he could, but at least Theo didn't question him.

And it wasn't a lie. It had been true, once.

"It made me more powerful, but it also... I had to think about what I want for my life. And it's *not* being like Aunt Bella. I want..."

"You want to become an Unspeakable," Blaise filled in dryly.

Draco felt tears threatening to prick at his eyes. "I don't want to be just what my father tells me. I want to decide for myself. And you all don't want me to change. You want to just stick to all the old traditions, just because they're *there*- just because they're what your fathers think- whether they make sense or not! You all *know* how insane it is to not let girls even try out, but you didn't say anything! *Millie is better than Bletchley!* We all bloody know it! And if we'd had a better Keeper in third year, I wouldn't have caught the Snitch all three matches and still have had Slytherin lose the cup! Does *that* make sense to you, just because Millie's got *tits*? Of course I wouldn't want to be friends with you if you're that kind of people, if that's what you believe, because it's *dumb*, and I don't like *stupid* people!"

Maybe his resolution to be humble and conciliatory was falling away a little. "I miss playing Quidditch with you, okay? It was fun. I didn't come to your birthday and play it with you in first year, Vince, because my father forbid me, after he beat me so bad over my aunt's wand that I could barely *walk,* and every time I look at all of you, I'm wondering what you're going to say about me to your families- whether you think my father is *right*-"

"Draco," Theo said, reaching out and putting an arm around his shoulders. The talon wand let Theo take it and gently guide it back into Draco's pocket. Draco's hands were shaking too hard to do it himself. "Draco, it's okay. We understand. *I* understand. Getting that wand changed things for you." Draco nodded. "But you didn't have to push all of us away. We would *all* have kept your secrets." Draco didn't know if he believed him. Theo could speak

for himself, but not the others. But he nodded again anyway. "None of us want to see you hurt. I don't want *anyone* to get hurt like that, ever. I hate all that business that comes with who our fathers are. You know that."

Blaise shrugged elegantly. "I suppose," he said dryly, "If it means *that* much to you, Draco... if you hold tryouts again, I'll show up and stay this time. I'm not likely to get on the team anyway, I was really more there to see the show. And to watch Pansy fly about in Quidditch robes."

Where Blaise went, the others followed. When Draco held tryouts again, the next day at the same time, none of the boys from any other years showed up. But all the girls were back, and every fifth-year boy was there with them.

The Cursed Quill

Chapter Notes

Hello all! I've been seeing questions about Draco's inability to do the Disillusionment charm. As for it being used for Draco, Crabbe, and Goyle to sneak into the Room of Hidden Things after Harry, I always assumed that if Crabbe was capable of casting Fiendfyre, he could cast the Disillusionment charm for them too. Later in the battle, we see Draco fleeing through the halls alone without using it, and needing to be protected again by the trio, so I assumed he wasn't the one who could do it. That's what I've been going with lol. Bear with me ^^

Anyway, enjoy! <3

Playlist

Draco dealt with the impending prospect of a Black Quill in the way best suited to his strengths: he cursed it. He had Defense that Tuesday morning with Umbridge, before Harry had detention with her that night. His time with Rita Skeeter had given him the idea, and so after Umbridge had finished not teaching them for a solid two-hour block, he watched her go right down the stairs, past her office towards the Great Hall for lunch. That was Draco's cue to go around the corner, put on the invisibility cloak, and break into Umbridge's office.

He was certain she would have a number of special locking systems up, as well as warding and detection against any intruders, but it was child's play to get himself in. All he had to do was one negligible bit of magic from the *Moste Dark Blood Rituals of the Demon Goddess Hecate*, which he had kept all summer and heard nothing about from Harry. Maybe Harry had reported it lost. In any event, Draco considered it his.

The so-called ritual, Hostium Posticum, was almost laughably simple, more of a little prick and wand-flick in front of the doorknob. He'd had premature orgasms that took longer. All he had to do was carve Hecate's wheel on his palm with a dagger 'impregnated previously with the darkest magicks'- Periander's moonstone dagger he always kept on him, check- press the wheel in the shape of his blood onto the enemy's possession- she'd left a handkerchief in the dustbin after call, check- and cast the incantation Aemulus immitis three times in succession, then a quick prayer to Hecate and boom, easy as. It said it required a powerful wizard and an incredibly large outlay of dark magic to work, but Draco barely felt a tinge as the door slid obligingly open.

Okay, so one of his goals for the year had been no more blood magic rituals, and he'd broken it before the first week of classes was out. But this hardly counted... and according to the

book, he should be able to use the dagger to unlock any of Umbridge's holdings or possessions now.

Although that was a mixed bag, once he went in and beheld what horrors Umbridge had made of the Defense office. Say what you would of the Carrows, he had preferred them as interior decorators. Fewer *doilies*.

The Black Quill was in the top drawer of her desk, separated from the others, darker and thinner and more sinister-looking. He had thought her too poor to afford more than one of these nasty things- Merlin, was he glad his father had never decided to invest in one- and so it appeared. If she had more or ordered another, he would just break in and curse those too. "Flagrante," he whispered. He put all the force of the talon wand into it, to be sure it would be hard to break. When he put a fingernail to it to test it after, he nearly burned off the entire finger.

So he had accomplished his goal, with no one the wiser. Harry never even asked him what he'd needed the invisibility cloak for. When he returned it, he was more interested in grilling Draco on the new Slytherin line-up. Bizarrely enough, he claimed to have followed Draco's orders this time not to spy on his Quidditch practices, which almost hurt Draco's feelings. Didn't Harry fancy him at *all* anymore?

Ron corroborated Harry's story. "And you don't know what it costs him to stay away, mate," he laughed, whispering behind Harry and Hermione's back in their next Potions class. "If you could see how many times he's drawn up prospective Slytherin line-ups..."

Far more times, it seemed, than he read the instructions in Potions class. Draco was going to have to start working on providing Harry alternative motivation to try harder in that.

It was certainly easier for Harry, though, without any wound on his hand this time around. Umbridge was the one wounded in their first detention, as Harry told a bemused story of Umbridge producing a 'special' quill for him to write lines with, only to yelp and drop the quill, running out screeching. Eventually, all he'd had to do was write lines, night after night. He complained, of course, rubbing his hand and going on about the insulting tedium of scratching down *I must not tell lies* over and over. If he had known what he could be scratching it into, though, he wouldn't have complained. Luna reported with satisfaction that she'd overheard Umbridge complaining to Madam Pomfrey that none of the treatments worked. While she'd told Pomfrey it didn't hurt anymore, apparently the scarlet burn on her palm remained just as dark as ever.

Harry's detentions did impact him, though, by putting him immediately behind on all his homework. The pre-OWL load seemed too much for him already. Draco offered the unthinkable, and wrote his Potions essay on moonstones for him. He took great effort with Harry's ugly handwriting, finding the Falsifingus spell to transform his writing to it, and he made sure to copy Harry's tone and intellectual deficiencies as best he could. He thought it could fool even Severus. And if Severus detected the cheating, he never called them out on it.

That night, Draco kept himself away from the Gryffindor tryouts, though he was curious if anyone would be dumb enough to try and supplant Harry as Seeker in his absence. From the sounds of it, no one had, and the grand announcement at the library on Saturday morning was Ron's ascension to the position of Keeper. Draco had seen it coming, but he still gave Ron the mother of all high fives, and then a fist bump, and then another high five. "See you at flying at midnight, mate?" Ron enthused. "We've got our first practice this afternoon, but tonight..."

"Well, we'll be practicing Saturday nights now," Draco said uncomfortably. "And Tuesday and Friday nights... and besides, Ron, now that you're officially on another team, I don't think..."

Ron's face fell. "Yeah, you're right," he said, and Hermione patted him on the back.

"Three nights a week?" Luna asked. "Already? That's so much, Draco. Is it because there's so many new players?"

"I wouldn't call them new," Draco said evasively. Harry looked liable to die out of curiosity.

"This isn't fair," Harry complained. "You told Luna everyone you picked?" Luna nodded.

"She asked," Draco said with a shrug, and Harry smiled at him hopefully. "Oh, you can *ask,* Harry. You just might not get the same result."

"I'll find out eventually," Harry groaned. "Luna, will you please... it's not fair, Gryffindor is marching up running to tell Draco who's playing what, and I just have to keep guessing..."

"It is only fair, Draco," Hermione said severely, and pressed until Draco agreed.

"Okay," said Draco, "Fine, Harry. I'll show you mine if you show me yours." He ignored the faint, dirty-minded flush that put on Harry's face, and began to write out a starting line-up on a sheet of parchment. "Write yours too," he demanded, shielding his with his arm.

Harry handed over a line-up virtually unchanged from third year.

Ron Weasley

Fred Weasley George Weasley

Alicia Spinnet Angelina Johnson (C) Katie Bell

Harry Potter

"Typical," Ron laughed, when he looked over Harry's shoulder upon the trade and saw Draco had been less forthcoming.

Bulstrode

Crabbe Goyle

Parkinson Nott Greengrass

Malfoy

"Which Greengrass?" Harry began to demand, incensed, while Draco marveled that Harry knew there were two of them. "Daphne or Astoria?"

"You know their *names*?" Draco drawled. "Even the third-year one? Why, Harry, you *are* quite the connoisseur of Slytherins, aren't you?"

"Shut up!" Harry squawked, and buried his red face in his arms.

"Everyone's new but Draco," Ron said with a frown. "What the hell happened here? I mean, I heard no one was happy about girls being let in, but..." Hermione poked her head in, looking up from where she had begun to tune out the Quidditch talk.

Draco put on a haughty face. "It was time for a clean-out of some of the dead wood and dross, I'm sure any observer would agree. I'm not about to catch the Snitch all three times *and* lose the Cup again."

"Oh, you're not catching the Snitch *three* times at all," Harry said menacingly. Or it might have been, if he hadn't mumbled it with his red face still buried in his own arms.

"No wonder you're practicing three nights a week," Ron said. "How are you not calling them *new*? No one but you has played a day of Hogwarts Quidditch in their lives."

It seemed in Draco's head like Vince and Greg had, but the blue loop didn't count. "We have our *ways*, Slytherins. Don't you worry about us." That sounded cooler than admitting they had all used to play Quidditch together at play dates and birthday parties when they were children.

The first practice didn't go as badly as he'd feared, even with night approaching. Everyone seemed motivated, which was natural when Draco thought of how much they had to prove everyone wrong now. They had all put themselves out on a limb with this, not just Draco. They had defied tradition, risking their reputations, and no one was more sensitive about reputation than a Slytherin. Not to mention Astoria's older sister hadn't spoken to her in days, nor to Draco, over Astoria making the team over her. It wasn't *Draco's* fault that Astoria had a better throwing arm on her. The only wrinkle was Blaise showing up despite being cut, but at least he confined himself to sitting in the stands, doing homework by a floating candle, and only occasionally making smart comments.

So fifth year as a whole could have gotten off to a much worse start. Ron and Harry didn't seem to agree, as they had fallen further behind their work already with their extra Quidditch practices along with Harry's detentions, and Hermione's refusal to let either of them copy off her anymore. She browbeat Draco into doing the same. Harry and Draco seemed to come to a silent agreement not to mention the Potions essay Draco had written for him to the others.

So it was that their study table was the site of great lamentations as well as great incompetence. Neville seemed to become a regular fixture there, with his own struggles no less than Ron and Harry's. Or maybe he just fancied Luna too much at this point to resist any chance to hang around in her vicinity.

When Draco pointed out that Neville was sitting with them because he had a crush on Luna, she shook her head and whispered, "Oh, Draco, it's not that, it's more complicated."

"You do know he fancies you," Draco said, frowning. "He asked you to the Yule Ball."

"And there's no Yule Ball this year!" Luna said, before Draco gestured for her to lower her voice and pulled her further back into the Charms stacks. Herbology stacks were a terrible place to gossip about Neville Longbottom. "I don't think he *fancies* me, Draco, I think he just wants to be friends. He's always wanted to be closer to those three, you know? He idolizes them. And..." She hesitated, face clouding. "It's a show of loyalty, picking his library table differently, you know? Like you not playing football with Seamus Finnigan."

That was because he was too busy now as Quidditch captain, but from the way Dean had looked as he'd told him, Dean at least had taken it to have a different motivation. Draco still didn't really understand, until she pulled him to the side and showed him Dean and Seamus at their own table, on the other side of the main open area. "See, Neville usually sits with them," Luna explained, "But he wants to show however he can that *he* believes Harry, even if Seamus doesn't. Harry has it rough enough already."

She was right about Harry having it hard. The next day, Draco was shown a truly extraordinary letter by Ron, which proved the point so well it made him grateful for Neville voting with his feet. "Check out this codswallop," Ron said briskly, "You're the only one who hasn't seen, you can burn it or whatever once it's done."

Draco skimmed over the letter from Percy on that rainy Monday afternoon, an owl that had come unceremoniously to a window in Gryffindor Tower the previous night. It was a letter longer even than the oversized missives Draco and Sirius tended to send each other. Between incoherent complaints about the embarrassment the Scabbers story had caused their family, Percy's overall message came through loud and clear: stay away from Harry Potter, and sever ties with the Order of the Phoenix entirely.

"Do you mind if I keep this?" Draco asked. "Some blood magic that calls for a person's possession, you can just use a letter sent by someone for it."

"Draco Lucius Malfoy," Hermione began, and Draco gave her his cutest pout.

"What," he whined. "He's my least-favorite Weasley."

"Wait," Ron said. "You have a ranking for us?"

Draco was happy to put aside that disturbing, pernicious letter and attend to happier topics, even if the warning Percy had put about Umbridge being given more power had already come true. The Daily Prophet had announced, as in the blue loop, that Umbridge had been made Hogwarts High Inquisitor, with the only real point of interest in the article a quote from Father acting as if he was *so concerned* over the educational standards for his son. Ron and Harry had already sat through a Divination class supervised by Umbridge, in which she had harassed Trelawney so excessively that the story even made Hermione express sympathy for her.

Then there had been the conversation Harry held with Sirius last night by the two-way mirror, where Sirius had given Umbridge's agenda a darker background: apparently, the information from inside the Ministry was that Fudge didn't want Hogwarts students trained in combat, for fear Dumbledore was raising them as a private army to take on the Ministry of Magic. Draco laughed out loud at that, remembering the blue loop and the formation of Harry's group, 'Dumbledore's Army', but none of the others had been laughing at the thought of a whole year without any defense training, right after the Dark Lord's return. One would think Fudge was working for Voldemort, setting up the youth as sitting ducks. But no, Draco knew from the inside last time that Fudge was just foolish and blind. And sometimes, foolish and blind could be just as dangerous as evil. From all the bad tidings to share, it was no wonder that the other five at their table leaped on the idea of Draco's Weasley ranking as a welcome distraction from the troubles of the real world.

"Percy's last, obviously, yeah," Ron said eagerly. "No surprise there. Called you a Death Eater in front of the entire school."

"He was even beforehand," Draco said with a haughty sniff. "Now give me a moment, I need to review my official ranking. Then I'll write it up for you lot, and give my explanations." He got a fresh piece of parchment and filled it out with a flourish, before magically copying the sheet to a copy for each of them. Neville looked very happy to have chosen their table over Seamus's.

First Official Ranking of Weasley Children

September 9, 1995

Draco Malfoy

7. Percy

6. Ginny

5. Bill

4. George

3. Fred

2. Ron

1. Charlie

The list didn't seem to make anyone happy. Neville was confused. Hermione and Luna were indignant to find Ginny so low, complaining that Draco didn't even *know* Bill, it was almost like Draco had a grudge against Ginny or something. And Ron and Harry were both indignant that Charlie was in first place.

"I've been your mate for over four years now!" Ron said, sputtering in indignation. "And you still put me behind my brother because you think he's *hot*?"

Draco shrugged. "There are a number of complicated factors that go into this ranking, too intricate for simple minds to follow..."

"You really do fancy Charlie, don't you?" Harry said darkly. "You two didn't spend any *time* together at the party for Sirius at the Burrow, did you?"

"The age of consent in Wizarding Britain is 16," Luna said brightly. "You're almost there!"

"I'm so lost," Neville said, and everyone ignored him.

Draco got nothing but grief later as well, when George found out he had been ranked below his brother. He demanded to know if it was just alphabetically-motivated, or if Draco had something against him. Draco couldn't exactly tell him, *I feel bad for your brother because he's the one who's going to die,* so he just drawled, "You'll never know," and earned a very impolite gesture before George let him be.

These Weasleys took this too seriously. Competitive in everything, that lot, though seven siblings with limited finances *did* have to inevitably turn Hobbesian at a certain point. No wonder Ron had such a huge brother complex.

Still, everyone was worrying about which Weasleys Draco thought were superior, and not whether Fudge or Umbridge was about to get Harry or Dumbledore arrested. That was a real win.

Harry got himself another week of detentions from Umbridge, but no Black Quill appeared for those either. So either Draco's curse had done as he hoped, and scared Umbridge off the things for a while, or she just couldn't afford another yet.

Draco's attention turned to another kind of dark magic: his blood magic book, Hecate's wheel, which in July Draco had, in all his infinite wisdom, decided would be the perfect symbol for Hermione's birthday present. It wasn't an etched design, but an actual wheel, intricate and mysterious with the five-pointed star wedged securely between the mottled turquoise coils. He'd used a real blue diamond from one of Great-Aunt Walburga's bracelets for the star, taking hours and hours just on the minute work carving its facets carefully, and it stood out prismatic and almost eerie within the whirls of darker blue.

It would probably be the most beautiful charm of all, even over the dragon Ouroboros that Severus had been the one to carve for her last birthday. But looking at that symbol reminded him of the spells he'd been doing. He thought his guilt would bleed through somehow when he showed the charm to Severus, the night before Hermione's birthday. But all Severus did was agree it was an adequate present, more than visually appealing enough to fit in with the rest of the bracelet, and shoo him away. He was being kept busy with all of the extra potions he was making for Draco, so Draco couldn't blame him: draught of peace, angel's infusion, and even Wolfsbane.

Severus had insisted that he not only keep making draught of peace, though Draco's had turned out fine in class, but that he would take over the other two Draco had been doing at Grimmauld. Draco had been speechless at the notion of Severus making Remus's potion for him again, when he had seemed more likely to concoct a potion of his own entrails to serve him. But Severus had just said something dry about Draco's Sisyphean ambition of twelve OWLs, making it likely that with any more extracurricular work, Draco would have no time for his captaincy at all.

"I expect tactical *transformation*," he informed Draco over the glitter of the charm of the wheel, with the smell of a perfect batch of Wolfsbane wafting between them. "I expect scintillating, cutting-edge Quidditch. I *expect* the Quidditch Cup with green and silver trophy ribbons, and the House Cup for Slytherin with it. So go off and draft some plays. I have a myriad of potions to *slave away upon* for my burdensome godson."

Draco gave Hermione a lovely birthday party, as well as the Hecate's Wheel charm, which she had oohed and ahhed over, with no one but Luna thinking it anything more than a pretty sort of rune. They had sadly agreed there was no more room for new charms on the bracelet. It left the final contents of her bracelet as a dragon's tooth, an ankh, a St. Brigid's cross, a Medusa head, a pomegranate, a star of Ishtar, a Kali yantra, a dragon Ouroboros, Hecate's wheel, and an H for Hermione. Years of friendship unbroken. He hoped she wouldn't get bored of it too quickly.

He pledged to get Hermione a mystery book for this Christmas instead, which marked it as high time for him to devote himself to his other transfiguration project, a secret to everyone but him and Sirius. And now his Transfiguration professor, as it was not Severus but McGonagall he ended up spending his time hanging around for extracurricular help. He didn't *want* to let Severus down, taking on more projects to distract himself from his duties as Slytherin captain. But he had promised to do the rings for Sirius and Remus already, and hoped she would be amenable to at least giving him instructions for a direction to take. She *was* in the Order of the Phoenix with them.

"A beautiful design, Mr. Malfoy," was her first assessment, when he put the picture down before her. She gave it a good look over, though he was holding her up from the lesson's clean-up. "Did you draw this from a real snowdrop?"

"Yeah," Draco said, and showed her his sketchpad's earlier pages, full of much more dilapidated-looking snowdrops. "I know there are more picturesque-looking flowers, but..."

"Does the flower have some special sentimental meaning?" McGonagall asked, with an unexpectedly soft smile herself. "Do you mean to use embellished enamel, or entirely gems?"

"Gems. And flowers plural," Draco said, and took a deep breath. "Two of them. One for each ring. And I'm not sure. Professor, this... this is a serious project. I don't know if you've seen, I make transfigured jewelry, like, a lot, just as a present for friends... but this is something I'm getting paid for- I mean, I'll give the money back if not's good enough, or if he doesn't end up using it-"

"Calm down, Mr. Malfoy. Why are you whispering?"

Draco pulled out his wand and called, "Inmotus." McGonagall didn't say anything in response to him surrounding her classroom in an Imperturbable charm, but her eyebrow did quirk up, reminding him of Severus. "Sorry, it's a secret..."

"A secret," McGonagall echoed. "And who else knows of this secret, Mr. Malfoy?"

"Just you and me," Draco said, and then took the plunge. "And, um, Sirius Black..."

McGonagall looked at him, then down at the design and the form of it, with the round white gold band of the ring weighted with a drooping snowdrop. Slowly, that cat-like face behind her spectacles face spread into the gentlest smile he had ever seen it wear. "Come to think of it, I remember Mr. Black flooding our house's table more than one Valentine's Day in a deluge of snowdrops."

She looked past him, and then she walked over and touched one of the desks, and then the one beside it. "Here is where they sat in my class, Mr. Malfoy." She did not specify to which side had been James Potter or Pettigrew, though he could see the darkness briefly in her eyes, as they both had the thought. "I looked at that desk of Mr. Black's many times after his conviction, and tried to understand how the boy I remembered, troublesome and cantankerous and so full-hearted, could have become what they said he was. It has been one of the great joys of my time as a professor, to find that I was *right* about one of my students, and that all that potential will *not* go to waste.

"Most of all for Professor Lupin's sake. Rarely have I ever had such a humble, dedicated, and brilliant colleague. He deserves this miracle. He deserves impossible things. I would be honored to help you with your project, if even one small thing of beauty can help bless them along the way to the life I *know* Mr. Black dreamed of, since they were younger than you are now... yes, it would be my honor, Mr. Malfoy."

She was looking misty-eyed, and Draco felt much the same. "It doesn't bother you that it's two men, Professor? They won't be able to get married legally, but..."

McGonagall waved aside the objection dismissively. "Such love has been felt by some of history's greatest wizards... if also some of its darkest. Because love is just love, Mr. Malfoy, in whatever form it takes. And *they* hurt no one with that love. Those who would begrudge Mr. Black and Mr. Lupin their happiness, after everything they have suffered? Love is not something such people even understand, let alone the power of the magic in it. I do believe, Mr. Malfoy, there will be powerful magic in these rings you make. With or without these rune designs." She cleared her throat, making herself go business-like. "Did you imagine these painted?"

"I've been imagining some kind of gem-work you can't do without magic," Draco said with a sheepish smile. "It's way beyond what I can do, which is why I came to you, Professor. I don't know if you've ever transfigured this kind of thing before, and I know I'm not even in your house, so you don't have to help me, but..."

"What did you imagine for the runes, Mr. Malfoy?" she asked impatiently.

"Something like liquid diamonds, actually," Draco said, rubbing the back of his head. "Melting gems down, and using them as a sort of paint in their most liquefied form. I had this as white gold, but the band could be black gold- mottled or pure black- or even raw black diamonds- it would set off the snowdrops more... a whole band of raw diamond would be pretty special..."

"The melted diamond effect should be possible," McGonagall said, pushing up her spectacles and looking down at his drawing again critically. "Although it is incredibly advanced and precise magic. What does sound impractical is the sheer *expenditure* of-"

"No, not really," Draco said brightly, and reached into his bag and produced the huge onyx-and-gilt jewelry box from Grimmauld. "Here's what we're working with. No holds barred. The more of it we use up, the better, really. Call it an exorcism. You know where it's from, don't you?"

Once Draco opened the box and she saw the number of Black sigils, she understood. "Oh, yes, Mr. Malfoy," she murmured. "An exorcism indeed. Oh, yes, this shall do nicely. You will have to take out books... perhaps send for some... we should write you a list of titles..."

Draco began the slow, close, intricate, patient work of crafting a snowdrop ring for Remus, and then making a matching one for Sirius. He was waiting for Hagrid to get back for full OWL review, in hopes he would privately help him review for the Care of Magical Creatures OWL, and Severus taking over all his potions was a godsend. But Draco was kept busy with the rings, the other eleven OWLs in prep, coursework, and practices three days a week. He had to plan for an entirely new Quidditch team, up against a seasoned Gryffindor in November. So when he and Luna heard the first rumblings of Dumbledore's Army, Draco's immediate response was, "Absolutely not."

"You don't think it's a good idea?" Hermione said, looking so disappointed by his reaction, it was hard not to feel guilty. Harry's head lifted at that, as if looking for Draco to give him an excuse to bail out of it before it began.

"No, no," Draco said hastily, raising his hands. "It's great. I just don't want any part of it."

"You gave Harry private dueling lessons last semester," Ron said, and Draco cast the Inmotus around their part of the Transfiguration courtyard again for good measure. Some second-year Hufflepuffs tried to cut across the grass towards their class, and had to stop puzzled as an invisible barrier repelled them. "You did," Ron persisted, rolling his eyes at the sight of Draco repelling the Hufflepuffs. "And we all know that came in handy, didn't it?"

"It's great, if Harry's willing to provide all you lot a real Defense education," Draco agreed, not wanting to dissuade them from a very worthy pursuit. "Salazar knows Umbridge won't. But you can't start a Defense Against the Dark Arts club with *me* around. I bring the Dark Arts, yes, but not so much the defense."

"What about the visual appeal?" Ron joked. "Who's going to bring that without you?"

Draco smirked at the reference to his own joke, then put on a look of faux-offense. "Excuse *you,* did you not notice my lovely *cousin* here beside you? You're in, aren't you, Luna?" Luna nodded excitedly. She seemed the most committed new member of Dumbledore's Army before it even began. "Luna brings visual appeal for days. Have you not noticed her earrings?"

Neville offered copious praise, while Luna obligingly pulled her hair aside to show off the day's earrings, which were a pair of singularly surly little hanging pink armadillos. When you petted them, they sneered at you, and when you scratched them behind the ears, as Draco demonstrated, the armadillos would turn to look at each other in weary despair over what they had to put up with.

"You don't have to *join*," Hermione said with a sigh, ignoring his diversion attempts. "But will you just come along to this meeting we're setting up? The first weekend in October is Hogsmeade. We're going to tell everyone who's interested to meet us at the Hog's Head to plan it-"

"Well, that's right out, then," Draco interrupted. "A Malfoy in the Hog's Head? It's against the laws of nature- the skin would crawl off my bones of its own volition-"

"Draco... Lucius... Malfoy," Hermione said firmly. "*Frankenstein*! You are *coming*, and that is *that*!" Draco's mouth fell shut. "Well?" she barked.

"Okay," Draco said in a meek voice. "But I'm not *joining*, alright?"

"Alright," said Hermione. "It's settled. October 5th. We're all going?"

"No one but us is even going to show up, I bet," Harry complained. "Who's going to want to hear what I have to say? Except to make fun of me or call me a murderer..."

"You might be surprised," Hermione said primly, and Draco knew she was right.

"Let's make a mandatory member count below which I don't have to join," Draco began.

Harry sighed and rolled away from him on the grass, staring off at nothing. "It's fine. It'll be easier without Draco taking part anyway."

Suddenly, Draco found himself seized with the mad desire to join Dumbledore's Army if it was the last thing he ever did. If that was meant to be reverse psychology, it was distressingly effective. He sat up and peered over to see Harry's face, only to find he just looked distant.

"What," Draco said, trying to keep from sounding offended, "Why will it be easier for you?"

"For one," Ron said, "Try thinking of some spell to teach Draco he doesn't already know."

Draco considered, then stretched out on his back beside Harry, and began prodding him in the calf with his foot to get his attention. "Here's one, Harry. Can you do a Disillusionment charm?"

"No," Harry said, ignoring him, and rubbed at his scar. Draco considered, then grabbed Harry by the shoulder, rolled him over, and began to poke insistently at his scar. "Hey! What are-"

"Does it hurt?" Draco enthused manically. "Does it? Does it hurt? Does it hurt?"

"It does now!" Harry protested, but as he began to grapple playfully with Draco, he was laughing, his beautiful green eyes come back to life again.

Umbridge had seemed done with class inspections in September, but she soon came for another one in Charms, making Draco fear that she was suspicious about Dumbledore's Army forming, and checking up on Draco. Except she seemed to have it in for Flitwick once she arrived, the same way she did for just about every professor who didn't actively, publicly despise Dumbledore. So maybe that was the reason for her inspections resuming.

Poor old Flitwick, as perfectly ordinary and competent a professor as anyone could imagine, had to suffer her constant pointless interruptions throughout, with her little cough of *Hem, hem* cutting off every time he was about to make a useful point. And when they were told to practice the Color Change charm individually on their berets, she seemed to hone in immediately on the two least likely to succeed: Vince and Greg.

Charms was hard enough for these two, even without having spent the past night up late at Quidditch practice, with a now-regretful Draco as their slave-driving captain. As it was, neither of them had done a thing to change the felt from black to the requested bright red.

"Do you feel you have received adequate instruction to be ready to perform this charm on your own?" Umbridge pried.

In a class of only the nine fifth-year Slytherins, everyone could hear her loud and clear. Draco gritted his teeth and kept his head down, but it was hard to ignore the awkwardness in the air, as Vince answered after a confused moment, "Yeah, totally."

"Oh, but then, my dear boy, why is your hat only turning blacker?"

Vince's face flushed in a way usually reserved for heavy flying sessions, "Don't do anything stupid, Draco," Theo hissed, "It's not worth it," and Draco's nails dug into his palms.

"Well, it is a new charm," she said, with a high giggle no one else in the room shared. "I'm sure you'd be more effective with charms from previous years, wouldn't you, dear boy? Professor Flitwick, what *were* the charms you covered last year in this class?"

Flitwick stepped forward nervously. "The locking charm," he said, "The banishing charm... Vermillious... the scouring charm... the exploding charm... the summoning charm..."

Umbridge, who had been carefully watching Vince's face, caught him flinching at the summoning charm and pounced. "Ah, yes, excellent, the summoning charm!" she trilled. "Why, that should be a piece of cake for a fifth-year, if properly instructed! My dear boy, why don't you show us your summoning charm! Say, the tongs from the fireplace. Go on!"

"Accio tongs," Vince said, looking rather doubtful of his own ability to accomplish the charm, which, of course, he had barely ever managed last year. The closest he had come, reputedly, had been during exams, when in response to the command to summon an eraser, he had summoned Flitwick's glasses off him. "Accio tongs!" he said louder, doing the wand motion correctly, and the tongs quivered in the air, but showed no sign of budging.

"Draco," Theo hissed again, putting a hand on his arm, and Draco looked down to see his own hand had gone into his wand pocket.

"It's, er, it'll work in a second," Vince said dumbly, and Umbridge whirled on Flitwick triumphantly, who quivered before her alarmingly.

"Is this the- *hem, hem*- typical level of this class?" she asked, voice saccharine-sweet.

"All students are, er, all at different stages at different times," Flitwick said fumblingly, which was the kindest possible way of saying the student she'd picked was the biggest doofus in his year.

"Oh, really?" she said, widening her eyes in faux-enlightenment. "Who would you say is the best student in this class, then, Professor Flitwick?"

Draco tried to sink lower into his seat, but Flitwick didn't blink before happily proclaiming, "Oh, Draco Malfoy, without a doubt, he's a real prodigy."

Umbridge's jaw tightened, the pretense of niceness flickering in and out on her face at the reminder of the boy who had sparred with her on the Wizengamot stand. "Very well, then, Mr. Malfoy. Why don't you come to the front of the class, and we'll see the level of what the- *hem, hem- best* of you can do."

Draco glanced over at Flitwick, who looked elated by this turn of events, having full faith in Draco's casting abilities. The poor bastard had no idea he'd said the absolute last name he should have, if he wanted to get into Umbridge's good graces. He might have just signed his death warrant, if she didn't already have so many targets in her sights. Trelawney and Hagrid, the blue loop told him, were likely to come first. And Draco didn't want to be the reason for

Flitwick to be in trouble this time. He had no relationship with the man at all, good or bad. But in both timelines, this was a teacher who had never been anything but uniformly helpful, professional, and kind to him.

Draco marched up to the front desk in front of Flitwick's stacks of books, while Flitwick moved out of the way. "Very well," she said silkily. "Let's see *your* color-change charm."

"Accio beret," Draco said, forestalling any request for a summoning charm, before casting Colovaria and turning it a perfect Gryffindor crimson. She was dreaming if she thought she could name a charm from the curriculum that he couldn't do.

"The banishing charm," she ordered, and he duly cast Depulso and sent the beret flying away. "Vermillious," she said, and he sent up red sparks, unable to hide the boredom on his face, while Flitwick beamed in naive pride. On it went, through the third and fourth-year charms, until Umbridge seemed to realize she was getting nowhere, and went on to things he shouldn't have to know at the start of fifth year.

"Aguamenti," she said, and his boredom didn't change as he produced water from the end of his wand, summoning a log from the fireplace to extinguish with it. "Defodio," she said, and he couldn't hold back a short, contemptuous laugh as he used the Gouging charm on the burnt log. When he'd written out *I must not tell lies*, her gaze flicked up to his, before settling with some of the most vicious malice he had ever seen on a human face. It made him wonder if it was really Flitwick who she had come to assess today, after all...

"Reducto," she ordered, and he blew the log to bits, casting Ebublio to keep both him and her from being hit by the fragments. Then he elegantly flicked his wand, and made the fragments reassemble, the words *I must not tell lies* soon staring back at her the same.

"The Disillusionment charm," she ordered, seeming eager to erase the taunting words, and Draco froze. *Oh, fuck.*

"I think I've put on quite enough of a show for today, don't all of you?" Draco drawled, tossing his hair with a languid sneer. "Really, I should think no more demonstration need be given for the excellence of Professor Flitwick's Charms teaching. If anything, if going off my example, he ought to be sanctioned for being *too* good at his job." He was not about to stand up there and attempt a charm he knew he couldn't do, not in front of *her.*

"See? Look at my charmwork," he said, and levitated the log in the air before her eyes. "Lacarnum inflamari," he hissed, and sent a fireball to ignite the wood right in front of her face. She let out a shocked gasp and stumbled back, falling against the desk and sending some of Flitwick's books tumbling down. He could hear Theo telling the other students not to laugh.

"Don't worry," Draco sneered. "I have perfect control of it."

Umbridge let out a whimper that did his ego a world of good-

Until he saw her eyes were not following the flame, but his wand hand from so close to her. Could she have recognized the talon wand as Aunt Bella's somehow? It hadn't been a familiar

sight to her before, given how she never had them do magic in *her* class. That was his fear, until he followed her gaze from the talon wand to her *own* hand. So Draco stepped closer, staring at her through the heat haze, and got his first close look at Umbridge's burn.

He'd thought it the curve of a quill, but it was a sharp angle: a bend at the center of her palm, in a shape and thickness nothing like the Black Quill should have left when she touched it. The brand it had left was the exact impression the talon wand had made on the hands of Mother, Father, Sirius, and Karkaroff.

Except she hadn't touched his wand. Just a quill he'd cursed. Unless there had been something more in that ritual he'd done from the Hecate book to get into her office... but it had been easy, and he hadn't felt drained after it at all, energized if anything...

Draco Vanished the burning log and pocketed his wand, tearing his gaze away from her hand. She didn't seem to have noticed his attention on her talon brand, so fixed was the horrified transfixion of her own. "Is that enough of a demonstration, Professor Umbridge?" he asked, and faintly, she nodded.

"Well, Professor Flitwick," she managed to get out, though her usually ruddy face had gone pale. "Your student is... adequate. You will be receiving the results of your inspection within ten days," she said, and left the classroom before Flitwick could even wish her goodbye.

The other Slytherins as well as Flitwick gave Draco a hearty congratulations on his performance, though Draco was too shaken not to admit, "I can't do a Disillusionment charm, you know. I've tried."

"We'll cover it this year, my boy," Flitwick said warmly. "I will make sure you can by the time OWLs come around. Most impressive work, Mr. Malfoy."

"Yes," Draco said softly, with the image of the talon brand seared into his vision. "Impressive indeed."

Dumbledore's Murderer

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Draco had no intention of joining up to the Potter cult. But observing the sign-up session could hardly hurt. Apart from one or two security procedures Draco had insisted upon for the occasion, he had resolved to keep himself a silent observer to the side, as if he was still in the blue loop looking into Hermione's Pensieve or something, and enjoy witnessing a slice of history in the making. And possibly see if he could weasel some more satisfying beverages out of Dumbledore's goat-fancying brother than Butterbeer.

He's going to fight in the battle of Hogwarts, he thought in amazed incomprehension, as they entered a pub that seemed to attest to nothing about the owner but his lack of interest in sanitation. Draco had never so much as gone close to the window of such an outré establishment, but he did have to smile and stare for a while at the battered old rusty sign, with the head of the titular hog no cutesy cartoon pig but a real severed head, which bled eternally for the onlookers. He produced the reloaded Polaroid camera Hermione had given him so long ago, enchanted by now to work even at Hogwarts, let alone in its vicinity, and took an admiring shot of the head, artistically skewed. "See, definitely too fond of decapitation," he heard Ron mutter to Neville as they made their way inside.

"Well," Draco said, wrinkling his nose once they stepped inside. "This is... quaint." He tried to come up with a way to explain its squalor to himself in a way that didn't make its name mark the inside as a pigpen. "Authentic. Full of, erm, local color."

"Yeah, it's not that bad," Neville agreed valiantly.

"It's a dump," Luna said brightly, and Neville changed his tone.

"You're right, Luna, it's a total dump," he agreed.

Luna waved her wand to make the stubby candles around them burn brighter. Which was a mistake, as it further highlighted the composition of the floor. It looked like one of those enchanted swamps the Weasleys were working on. But Draco's feet didn't sink into it like quicksand as he had feared. It just seemed liable to ruin his fifth-best leather shoes.

"No one's going to come *here*," Harry said, and smiled at Draco's quizzical look. "I just remember Hagrid telling me about this place. This is where he..." Harry lowered his voice so Luna and Neville couldn't hear, and whispered with a fond light in his eye, "Won Norbert, you know..."

"You miss him a lot, don't you," Draco observed.

"Why shouldn't I?" Harry said with a defensive shrug. "What other professor would have gone drinking here?" He gestured around at the esoteric sort of clientele, who could have passed for a mummy, a ghoul, and a pair of Dementors. Draco fought the urge to draw his wand.

"Yes," Draco said with a forced smile. "Wow. So authentic. So quaint."

He had to hesitate, though, when the sound of unusually young voices made Aberforth Dumbledore appear from behind the bar. He was like some nightmare version of Dumbledore from an alternate dimension, elderliness making him seem decrepit rather than wise, a Dumbledore who had fallen on seriously hard times and never crawled out from under them. He was also, clearly, a committed alcoholic, in which case Draco could only mentally congratulate him on having at least had the sense to find himself the right profession.

"What?" he grunted. The notes of Dumbledore in that gruff voice were there, in another life.

"Six Butterbeers, please," said Hermione, and Draco raised a hand.

"Five Butterbeers," he said, "And one Chardonnay."

"Chardonnay?" Aberforth squinted. "What's this look like, Valhalla? How old are you, boy?"

"Eighteen," Draco said brightly, ignoring Hermione's sputtering. "I'll have a Firewhisky, then. The best mark you have." Aberforth looked drowsy but skeptical.

"If I was underage," Draco drawled, "Would I be able to do this? Caeruleum inflamarae," he cast, and the candle flames all rose in the air and turned a deep hot blue, before rising together and turning to bluebell flames in the air. He waved his wand around, and the ceiling of the place was wreathed like Draco had used to surround his room in Grimmauld, a delicate threading blue flame that went heatless upon Draco's concentration. It gave the place a mysterious rather than unsavory look, with the filthiness giving it the character of the ancient ruins of something better.

Aberforth looked unimpressed. "I've seen a wizard do that before he was nine," he observed. He likely meant his brother. But he still reached for the Firewhisky, only for Hermione to slap her hand on the bar, cheeks pink.

"He's fifteen," she snapped, "And he'll be having a Butterbeer like the rest of us."

They got the most horrifying-looking bottles of Butterbeer known to man, which Draco feared might carry some form of human-infecting rabies on their dusty glasses. "Twelve sickles," Aberforth grunted, and Draco put down twenty for the poor man's trouble. Getting glowered at by Hermione was worth at least that in aggravated damages for pain and suffering.

"Draco, the bar is so gorgeous now!" Luna enthused, although Draco privately thought the best effect of his display was that it had made most all of the patrons but them sidle their way

out. "Even more people will want to join in a place like this!"

Draco looked around them dubiously. "Oh, yes, before long we'll be beating them away."

But the bar was soon filling up. First came Dean and Lavender. Draco eyed them dubiously, and not just for the connection to Seamus. Hadn't Hermione said that Lavender didn't believe Harry either? Was she just here to try and kindle a flame with her Ickle Wonnie? Draco had no intention of letting that absolute plonk of a girl anywhere near a friend of his this time around.

They were followed by the Patil twins and the Gryffindor Quidditch team, and their friend Lee Jordan, whose voice had been the one Draco listened to during Potterwatch on long dark nights. On came the Creeveys, clearly desperate not to lose their status as the number one Harry Potter fanboys to a couple of dumpy-looking Hufflepuffs behind them, one or two of whom Draco vaguely remembered might have ended up on the wrong end of a Basilisk in second year... then came Hannah Abbott, Susan Bones, Anthony Goldstein, Michael Corner, Terry Boot, Cho Chang, some other Ravenclaw girl, and Ginny Weasley, probably ready to begin kindling her own passion with Harry. That, Draco wouldn't stand in the way of, even though the thought of having to see it gave him the realest motivation to stay away from Dumbledore's Army.

Harry seemed dismayed at all the people Hermione had invited, a motley crew that represented every house but Slytherin. Draco supposed he had to reluctantly count himself as fulfilling that lack. It was an assortment that looked to give the club roughly the same chance of being kept a secret as Sirius Black's acquittal. No wonder Umbridge had been on to them before it even began.

Poor Aberforth looked quite out of sorts. First, Draco had taken it upon himself to do something about the interior decorating, albeit temporarily, and now his pub had been invaded by such an infestation of do-gooders, he would be forced to besmirch its good name serving Hufflepuffs. At least the Weasley twins seemed ready to flash the cash, still flush from the present of Triwizard winnings only they, Harry, and Draco knew about.

"Hi," Fred said to Aberforth, "Could we have... twenty-five Butterbeers, please?" He seemed to want to keep those winnings to himself, actually, as he appealed for a collection to go around from the students. Draco stepped in front of the stack of dusty Butterbeers appearing, though, before anyone could take them. He had his own plans before anything remotely resembling fun.

"Listen, all of you now," Draco said, and didn't have to cast a Sonorus as he feared to make the pub go silent. "If you want to stay, you have to have your photograph taken by me. No exceptions." He received a great number of anxious stares at his Polaroid camera, whose unusual boxy form must likely seem cursed in his hands. "It will spit out a slip with your image, and you have to write your name on the back. Your full name."

Hermione produced the dark permanent Muggle marker, called a Sharpie, that she had gotten for this procedure, per Draco's needling. No one seemed very happy about Draco's procedure, but they all submitted instead of leaving the bar. One by one, their still faces filled the blank plastic, often prompting exclamations of shock and awe at the slow fade-in. "Yes, yes, it's

very dark magic," Draco bragged, before Hermione ruined his fun by loudly telling everyone it was a Muggle camera, which she had given Draco for Christmas when they were younger. "*Striker*! Spoilsport!"

He would have enjoyed menacing Zacharias Smith with that threat. Really, who had invited *him*? The only times Draco had ever interacted with him in either timeline were Quidditch and threats of Langlock. Draco took Smith's Polaroid from him and colored on devil horns.

Finally, the registered students settled at tables, mainly by house. Draco remained sitting up at the bar with Ron and Luna, while Neville joined Dean. Hermione marched Harry up to the front. She had promised to speak to introduce him before he had to say anything. Apart from all of Hermione's stuttering, it seemed to go fairly well, until Hermione gathered up the courage to tell them why they were really there, apart from passing their Defense OWLs. "I want to be properly trained in Defense," she said, taking a deep breath, "Because Lord Voldemort is back."

Draco didn't like hearing the name said either, but everyone reacted like the old bugger had showed up himself, transfiguring the stools into snakes, although that would admittedly be an improvement for the overall ambience. Hufflepuffs all about were aflutter, and idiots of the other houses with them. As if the Prophet hadn't gone on every other day about Harry 'lying' about that.

"Well... that's the plan, anyway," said Hermione. "If you want to join us, we need to decide how we're going to-"

"Where's the proof You-Know-Who's back?" Zacharias Smith cut in.

"Well, Dumbledore believes it-" Hermione said, quite logically, and Smith had the audacity to interrupt her. Her, Hermione Granger, who *would* be Minister of Magic someday, while Smith would be lucky to be cleaning her office for her.

"You mean, Dumbledore believes him," Smith said.

"Who are you?" Ron snapped, and Draco rolled his eyes, going through the Polaroids and lifting up Smith's to read off, as if he hadn't already known it.

"Zacharias Smith," Draco read drolly. "An unimaginative name for an unimaginative sod. Well, Zacharias Smith, if you don't believe Potter, there's the door. No, actually, even if you *do* believe him, there's the door. I'm not having your sort of dead weight clogging up this enterprise."

"Draco Malfoy?" Smith snapped in disbelief. "Who the hell do you think you are?"

"You just said," Draco said rather childishly, "Draco Malfoy," before smirking at him in a more sinister manner. "And you know what that means, don't you? Wingardium Leviosa!" Draco levitated the Polaroid, and Smith stalked up and made a grab for it. "Evanesco!" It disappeared between Smith's fingers. "Now out that door. Ventus!" The door slammed open, and several students shrieked. "Do I need to ask twice?"

Smith looked over at his fellow Hufflepuffs, but they were all frozen, looking as petrified as in second year. Then he glared at Draco viciously and sprinted out. Draco had expected, perhaps even hoped, that a Hufflepuff exodus might follow. But they all sat there with their big eyes gone so wide they looked like house elves.

Draco rolled his own eyes at them. "If you want to go, go. No one's stopping you. *Anyone* who thinks Harry's a liar. He stood up in front of all of you last year at the ending feast and told you exactly what happened. If that wasn't good enough for you- if you don't know who he is and what his word is worth by now- you don't deserve for him to teach you."

No one moved a muscle. Draco sighed in exasperation. "I'm not going to curse any of you, I promise. I'm a *friendly* Slytherin. See? Colovaria," he cast, and turned the blue flames gold and Gryffindor-red. A few of the younger students shrieked again, ducking their heads. Okay, that might have been counterproductive.

"Listen, all I'm trying to say is that Harry is a great wizard. He's going to be one of the best there's ever been, if he isn't already. You're all lucky to go to school at the same time as him, so you can say you've lived to know someone who's a real hero. And now he's willing to *help* you? You shouldn't be asking him if he's lying. Harry Potter doesn't lie. Ask him what he can show you, because you're going to *need* the things he has to teach you."

Draco hesitated, and heard his voice break as he finished, "You don't know it yet, but you will. You'll learn, how lucky you all will be, to have been here, in this room. With *him*. You'll learn."

A silence reigned around the now-gold and red room for a long moment, so long Draco worried that losing his temper had ruined it for everybody. But when he snuck a look at Ron, Ron gave him a stunned but grateful grin. The room was paying attention, at least. Even Aberforth Dumbledore had leaned across the bar to watch, and listen intently.

Then Susan Bones asked if it was true that Harry could produce a corporeal Patronus, and if he'd really saved all of the Slytherin students in the dungeons with one in third year. Harry sheepishly admitted it, and soon more students were asking questions eagerly, curiosity brimming about all the great things Harry had done.

"Did you really kill a Basilisk with that sword in Dumbledore's office?" Terry Boot asked. "Or was that just Malfoy's song?"

Luna smiled at Draco, and he squeezed her hand for a second under the bar, able to read her thoughts: she was proud that their little joke Valentine songs had the side effect of helping Harry's publicity, as much as they had been torture for Harry at the time.

"Er- yeah, I did, yeah," said Harry, rubbing the back of his head, and Luna hummed the tune of the Ballad of the Basilisk pointedly. "Oh, God, don't," he groaned, and the room relaxed as most of it burst into laughter.

"And in our first year," Neville hastened to add, "He saved that Philological Stone-"

"Philosopher's," hissed Hermione, while Draco buried his face in Luna's shoulder laughing. *Oh, Neville, this is why my cousin will never date you.*

"Yes, that- from You-Know-Who," Neville finished.

Luna raised her hand before speaking. "And he's the Triwizard Champion, you know!" she said excitedly. "He got through a maze full of dark creatures before any of the seventh-years!" She didn't seem to care that Cho Chang was there to hear Harry boosted up at Diggory's expense, though by all accounts those two were still going strong. Cho just smiled at the reminder. Without any fear that Harry might fancy her, Draco found himself loathing her less than he remembered. "He took on a dragon and didn't die! And even though there were Grindylows, he saved Draco *and* Fleur Delacour's little sister from the bottom of the Great Lake!"

Eyes went to Draco again, and Draco forced a smile through his embarrassment. "Oh, yes," he said. "It was very heroic. And he dueled the Dark Lord last summer in a graveyard-"

"Listen," Harry interrupted, and everyone fell respectfully silent. "Look. I... I don't want to sound like I'm trying to be modest or anything, but... I had a lot of help with all that stuff..."

"Come on, Harry," Draco whined, "Stop trying to be all humble, I know that's a Gryffindor thing, but you're ruining my *branding*," and earned another loud laugh, relaxing things further.

"The point is," Hermione said, cutting in with her steady focus where no one else had it, "Are we agreed we want to take lessons from Harry?" Everyone agreed, and then it fell into squabbling over logistics, as everyone tried to figure out a time around all their Quidditch practices. Draco didn't realize he was holding up proceedings until Luna elbowed him. "Draco," Hermione said, "Don't you have practice too for us to think of? When does Slytherin practice?"

"Well, *I'm* not joining," Draco said automatically, only to be greeted by a sea of disbelief.

"What the hell, Malfoy?" George complained, who still seemed to be taking his title as the lower-rated Weasley twin personally. "You give us that whole speech about how we're honored to be born at the same time as Harry, let alone be taught by him, but you aren't even going to show up?"

Had Draco lost his temper and backed himself into a corner? Apart from all of the unnecessary work and stress, common sense would indicate that Dumbledore's Army could hardly function properly when infested with Dumbledore's murderer. "It's not that," he said, flushing and crossing his arms, as he regarded a room full of people looking at him with utter skepticism.

He couldn't take back what he'd said about Harry, and saying he was too busy for the meetings would just make it sound like he'd been talking out of his arse. He tried something closer to the truth. "Me being around would make people uncomfortable. Come on, half of you think I'm going to curse you at any moment. I'm here to help set it up for my friends, and make sure it works out for *them*, but having me around would just spoil things-"

"But Draco," Neville said, with what sounded like real sincerity, "You're a *great* teacher."

"Luna," Draco said quickly, "The Wrackspurts, the Wrackspurts have gone to his brain-"

"It's true," Dean called. "You were always helping him and-" He cut himself off before speaking Seamus's name, as if Seamus's opposition to Harry had made him another He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named in this pro-Potter bunch. "You've helped him in Potions since first year. And I heard *you* were giving dueling lessons to *Harry* last year, weren't you?"

"Draco," Hermione hissed, "Just join. You can quit later, anytime you want, but if you don't show the proper enthusiasm now, other people might not want to join either."

"Alright, fine, I'll join, if my presence is in such high demand," he agreed, and several people at least did look rather gratified by this, Neville chief amongst them. He must really want to suck up to Draco to try and win his cousin's favor.

Hermione beamed at Draco, who was getting the feeling he was being sold a bill of goods and then dragged up the river with them, port by port. But he couldn't ruin history, so he fell in line again. They went back into logistics, agreeing to a meeting place that Draco knew would change to the Room of Requirement before they were through, and everyone put down their names on Hermione's list, with some grumbling.

Eventually, the meeting broke up, with the most controversial disclosure the one that Michael Corner and his friends had come because he was dating Ginny Weasley. Ron took this like an announcement Corner had kidnapped Ginny and meant to sacrifice her in some blood ritual to the demon goddess Hecate, maybe the one on page 55 or 205.

"They met at the Yule Ball and got together at the end of last year," Hermione explained, and Neville, who had been Ginny's date, nodded happily in agreement. He could not seem less bothered that Ginny had gone off hooking another bloke under his nose, probably because that nose had been dedicated to sniffing around after Draco's cousin the whole time, during and since. Ron grumbled about Michael Corner, expressing his dislike- seemed the poor boy had a sister as well as brother complex- while Draco stared at the quills in the display of Scrivenshaft's, following Hermione in with a frown.

"But," said Ron, following Hermione, "I thought Ginny fancied Harry!"

Draco tensed at the mention, losing interest in his search through the rows of quills. But then he tried to put on his most uninterested face, and looked through again, rather mechanically. He was all ears anyway, as Hermione explained, "Ginny used to fancy Harry, but she gave up on him months ago. Not that she doesn't like you, of course."

"So that's why she talks now?" Harry asked Hermione. "She never used to talk in front of me."

"Exactly," said Hermione. "Yes, I think I'll have this one..."

Oh, Draco thought dully. *So that's it. That's how it happens between them.* Harry fancying Draco showed he would prefer someone who challenged him, not genuflected towards him. Ginny had nourished her pathetic little crush for years, but eventually, she had discovered there were other boys and moved on. Combine that with her taking up playing Quidditch, even Seeker this year once Harry was suspended- Salazar knew Harry seemed to like Seekers- and it was all turnabout's fair play. Harry would no doubt end up missing the days when he had Ginny's full attention, regretting how he hadn't taken his chance when he had it, and somehow manage to bring Ginny back around, just like a perfect story. Draco could gag on how perfect it was.

It made a hell of a lot more sense than Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter. And not just because Ginny was a girl. Because Draco was who he was- *what* he was- and the best thing he could give Harry was just his protection. And when the time came, letting him go to someone who actually deserved his devotion.

With the thought of Harry's protection, Draco lingered behind the others at the counter, before addressing the shopkeeper. "Sir, have you ever heard of a Black Quill? Or a Blood Quill? It's a kind of quill that inscribes the words written with it onto the flesh of the person who writes them..."

"No!" the elderly shopkeeper exclaimed, looking affronted. "I have been in this business for fifty years, young gentleman, and in all my time I have never heard of such a thing! That sounds like the very foulest of dark magicks!"

Could Umbridge have invented it for her own use? Perhaps she was not as worthless a witch as he would have liked to think.

"So you wouldn't have one to sell me," Draco persisted, "Or anyone else, or know where to send off for a commission?"

"No!" the shopkeeper yelled again, slamming his hands down on the counter. "And I must ask you to leave my shop immediately!"

"Do you think it's something you *could* make, theoretically? For the right amount of money, under the table?" Draco persisted, wondering how long it might take for Umbridge to make another. Except hopefully, if it was her own invention, she would blame the burning on a problem in the magic, and give up the concept. But she seemed to have connected the burn's shape with Draco. Maybe she would give up on it then anyway, if she thought it too liable to be hijacked by another's magic... "How would you go about making it? How long do you think it would take?"

The other five had been waiting outside for him, but Ron had opened the door and peered inside impatiently, just in time to hear the shopkeeper scream, "You heard me! I never want to see your face here again! GET OUT OF MY STORE AND NEVER COME BACK!"

"Well, that was a bit of an overreaction," Draco said with a shrug as he wandered out leisurely to join the others, who were gaping at him in varying degrees of scandalized curiosity.

"Frankenstein," Hermione hissed, "How do you keep *doing* this? Gryffindor Tower is one thing. The Divination Tower I never understood, and you won't tell us, fine. But how in the world did you manage to get yourself banned from *Scrivenshaft's Quill Shop*?"

"He wasn't even in there very long," Luna told Neville. "It's impressive, don't you think?"

"Draco?" Harry prompted, and Draco just shrugged.

"I don't think he likes Malfoys," he lied elegantly, and led them towards Honeydukes.

He found his friends still gossiping about who fancied who as they approached the candy shop, with Ron ticking it all out on his fingers. "Well, now Ginny fancies *Michael Corner*, apparently. That's not a last name, that's just a part of a *room*... Hermione fancies Ikkle Vicky..."

"I'll have you know," Hermione said huffily, "I broke it off with Viktor Krum before the last school year ended. We haven't been in touch since. Draco's the only one who's written to him." And that had been for Quidditch advice, as the new Slytherin captain. The good news was, Draco had received pages of intricate Quidditch tactics sheets. The bad news was, they were all in German.

Ron had a slow smile spread across his face, one that should have told anyone with eyes who *he* fancied. "Really?" he breathed. "So you two aren't anymore- you never said!"

"What does it matter?" Hermione snapped crossly. "OWLs are this year, that's the priority!"

Ron got a goofy grin. "Nothing," he said quickly. "Okay, Draco fancies Charlie, and then..."

"He doesn't," Harry snapped, "Not really," and shoved the door to Honeydukes open with excessive vehemence. Hermione shot Draco one of her exasperated glares, the one that said *You could put him out of his misery so easily,* a look that Draco always pretended not to understand. And he discouraged any further talk of crushes, much to Neville's relief, relaxing behind them.

The high off the successful formation of Dumbledore's Army, which did not yet bear that name, only lasted until Monday, when he woke up to find a notice in the common room about Educational Decree 24. This was the one forbidding all student organizations, which had later been used as a pretext to hunt Dumbledore's Army for the Inquisitorial Squad. Upon seeing the notice, Draco winced at it, rather than finding it funny like last time. But he was unprepared for it to make his yearmates as gloomy as it did at breakfast.

"Why are you so clever sometimes," Theo lamented, "And so thick at others?" His full lips had gone especially pouty, too irked by Draco's insufficient reaction to be obliging and explain his gloominess.

Eventually, Draco got out of Greg that Theo thought Umbridge would apply her new rule to the Slytherin Quidditch team. "Don't worry, she'll give us permission to re-form right away."

He remembered that from the blue loop quite clearly.

"Sometimes, Draco, I think you're getting too arrogant for your own good," Blaise sighed, while practicedly beating off Vince's attempts to sneak pancakes off his plate with a defensive fork. "You're the team captain. She's going to make it as hard for you as possible."

"Remember what you said to her at Sirius Black's trial?" Millie reminded him.

"And you shot a fireball at her face!" Pansy added, looking excited by the memory.

"As if we needed one more enemy for this new team," Theo groaned.

"You already have a large enough enemy in your own incompetence," said Blaise.

"Okay, okay," Draco sighed. "Don't worry, alright? I'll figure it all out."

"Are we still practicing tomorrow night?" Theo persisted, and Draco made a face.

"If I have anything to say about it. I'll go see her ex post facto, alright?"

The trouble was, Draco had a packed schedule all day, with Charms, Double Potions, Arithmancy, and Ancient Runes keeping him busy almost until dinnertime. In Potions, he found out that the Gryffindors were well aware of the target of the decree, and planned to go on with the club anyway. Some blame was directed at Draco for sending away Smith, who they blamed for telling. Apparently Hermione had jinxed the sign-up sheet to make snitching on them punish more than their conscience, but Smith had never signed up. But when he offered to drop out of the club for his disgrace, they suddenly became more conciliatory.

He raced from the Ancient Runes classroom to Umbridge's third-floor office like he was after the Snitch, with a sinking kind of feeling in his stomach he made himself ignore. If she could have just shut down entire Quidditch teams, she would have done it to Harry in the blue loop.

"Come in!" she called in her syrupy-sweet voice, only for her gaze to darken when she saw who was there on the other side of the door.

Draco walked over and sat in the chair facing her desk, with the distinct feeling that if she could, she would bring those awful Technicolor kittens on the plates behind them to life, and feed his precious hair to them. "Professor Umbridge," he said, with the precisely calculated respect he had failed to show her thus far in the red line. "I read your Educational Decree this morning along with the rest of the school. I saw that it applies to team activities as well. As the captain of the Slytherin House Quidditch team, it falls on me to request your permission to formally reinstate it."

She put down the quill she had been holding, over a pile of essays she was marking. The top one was Hermione's, which Draco had read over for her before turning in. Umbridge had somehow contrived to only give Hermione an E for it, despite it being the most exhaustive dissection of counter-jinxes that Draco had ever read. "Ah, yes, Mr. Malfoy," she said, and Draco could sense her pleasure at having something he needed. She might mean to make him scrape and beg for it a great deal. This was why he had thought it would be better not to make

her an enemy, and yet here they were, with the pink lace over her hand probably still concealing the talon brand.

He could take a conciliatory approach, or a business-like one, or the stoic one. He could try patience. Alternately, he could take a mysterious or threatening one, which tended to be more his forte. He wished bizarrely that he could throw the threat of Father at her, like he could have in the blue loop. But with how tight Father was with Fudge, she would know full well that wherever Draco had been living, it had not been with his parents.

"You're a clever boy, aren't you, Mr. Malfoy?" she began, with so little pretense of niceness that he knew she had been waiting for this moment, perhaps from the time she drafted her decree. "Well... clever at *Charms,* at least. That *is* a different sort of cleverness than the real world calls for, don't you think?" She tittered repulsively. "So I have a trade to offer a... *clever* boy. I have sole discretion to allow or disallow your band of Slytherin *misfits* to play your 'Quidditch'," she went on, in a tone like she knew of the circumstances surrounding the team, and hardly considered them an impressive enough assemblage to merit the name of the sport. "I will grant you permission to re-form your team... when you get *this* off my hand."

She took off her right glove, and pushed her palm with self-righteousness across the desk. Oh, it was sweet to see a scar on that skin of hers, when if she'd had her way, she would have left a scar on Harry's hand instead. She had only gotten this because she had *tried* to.

"Professor Umbridge!" Draco gasped, looking from her hand up to her beady eyes with exaggerated concern. "That looks awful! What happened to your hand?"

"Now, now, Mr. Malfoy," she said grimly, "If you insist on pretending, I fear we will be getting nowhere indeed. Do you think I did not see the shape of your wand in Charms class? And do you think I was not close enough to see the curiously shaped brand on your *uncle's* palm, in that farce of a trial? What *is* this?"

"I don't know," Draco said through gritted teeth. "How did you happen to *receive* such a strange burn on your hand, *Professor Umbridge*?"

"So arrogant," she purred, and it raised his hackles far more to hear the word from her than Blaise. "So proud, for a boy whose family speaks of him the way they do... whose *father* admits his son carries the same *perversions* as his blood traitor uncle..."

"Shut up!" Draco yelled, losing his composure as he had resolved not to do. "Shut up about Sirius! You're one to talk about *perversions*!"

"Only one perversion concerns me now, Mr. Malfoy," she said silkily, leaning back in her chair as if by provoking him, part of her job had already been done. "The dark magic on my hand." He had thought she might give him detention for his outburst, but she seemed single-minded enough in her need to fix her palm to leave it aside. "Admit nothing if you do not wish, *dearest* boy. Consider this my consultation with one of Hogwarts' foremost experts on dark magic- save, of course, for that expert's godfather-"

"Stay away from him!" Draco yelled, and had a sudden, horrible suspicion of what might befall Severus from the Hogwarts High Inquisitor, should Draco not produce results for her.

Umbridge's lips turned up in the most genial smile, and she took a sip of her tea with her free hand, the angry brand still a taunting presence between them. "Mr. Malfoy, allow me to give you a bit of... maternal advice. You seem so in need of it, with your own mother no longer... involved, or should I say *interested* in your life. You are rather careless, for someone with so much still left to lose..."

"Oh, I'm nothing special. Everyone," Draco snapped, "*Everyone* has something to lose," and stared defiantly at her hand, the will not to drop his masks fading by the second. "You are an intelligent woman, *Dolores.* More than many must give you credit for, as a *half-blood*." He felt the air go ice-cold between them, which was good. Let her be thrown off-balance by the absolute discrepancy in class she had to feel between them, even if he was in disgrace with his famous family at the moment. "You make such interesting inventions, after all."

"Is that a confession, *Draco*, that you tampered with my quill?"

"If there were such a quill," Draco countered, "Is that a confession that *was* your invention, with the intention to use it on *children*? Dolores *is* Latin for pain and lamentations. And sadism is all very well and good, Dolores, but take some advice from me in return, freely given, student to teacher... you might be the one who wishes to be more careful in the targets that sadism *takes*."

She seemed a hair's breadth from drawing her wand and shooting curses at him, not that Draco was at all behind her in that tensed readiness. "I," she said haughtily, "Am the representative of the Ministry of Magic here at Hogwarts, of Minister Fudge himself. My authority even supersedes Dumbledore's-"

"Very well," Draco hissed. "That is your authority over me. And here," he said, gesturing to her hand contemptuously, "Is my authority over *you.*" He was gratified to hear her sharply-indrawn gasp. "If you would just *think* for a moment, Dolores, you would realize that if I was *capable* of removing the talon brand from a hand thus marked, it would no longer be on the palm of my uncle. But that's permanent. And it's far, far more than a decoration." He laughed softly as she pulled it to her face, staring at the crooked shape in horror at the news. "It doesn't hurt, you know *that's* a mercy... for *now*. And you must take every bit of mercy you can get from a Malfoy."

She regarded him for a long, calculating moment above her wounded hand. "*You* are no longer a Malfoy. You do realize that, don't you-"

"And neither are you," Draco said smoothly, hatred so thick in his veins that if he knew how, he would have made the brand burn her hand off her wrist. "You're no noble pureblood, you're nothing of the sort. Nor will you ever be, with that Muggle father of yours. You're nothing like a Malfoy at all. And out of the two of us, Dolores, who do you really think is more grieved by that reality?"

Umbridge's face went despairing then, and more hateful from that despair. "You're lying about the brand."

Draco smiled back at her face of hatred. "Please witness here that it was *you* who requested this demonstration," he said, crisp and posh and calm, "Of which of the two of us is a liar."

He made a show of casting his spell then as congenially and leisurely if he was remarking upon the weather. "Cauterizo."

Some part of him had doubted it would work. But she shrieked and held onto her wrist with more agony than he could have dreamed, as the talon shape reignited as if it was the first time.

It was beautiful, really, the line and sharp twist of it seeming to hover in the air above the scorching flesh. Like a musical note, at the point where a piece's most striking leitmotif twisted into a minor key for the very first time. He remembered Harry's scar from her in the blue loop, *I must not tell lies* written forever into that hallowed skin, and it was all he could do not to laugh at the sounds she made.

Some part of him had doubted, even if it did work, whether he would actually be able to make himself go through with it, given his old damnable *squeamishness*. He'd hated causing pain, when it came to being forced to use Cruciatus by the Dark Lord. He would have thought anything close to torture would have once again made his skin crawl and breath seize up. Instead, he simply felt a condescending amusement.

And stronger. He felt that too.

Maybe it felt good because it was unequivocally *just*. An eye for an eye. And a hand for a hand. That would teach her, to threaten Severus. Or try and hurt *Harry Potter*.

Once her screaming and the smell of burning ceased- it seemed to be far, far more severe than it had ever been for Sirius, despite Draco's lazy casting, likely because of the target- her beady eyes were the helpless eyes of an animal with its foot not only caught in a trap, but mangled by it.

"Shall we make a deal?" Draco asked, and biting back tears, a quivering Dolores Umbridge nodded.

The trade extracted then could not have been more simple: permission for Slytherin to re-form, and Draco, Umbridge, and Severus would stay out of each other's way. In return, Draco would not use the brand or any other magic against Umbridge. He was middlingly sure he could hold to that. But if necessary, he wouldn't exactly scruple to break his word to the likes of her.

"See?" Draco told the Slytherin team smugly at dinner, arriving late but with the news the team was reinstated. They were incredulous, while Ron and Harry proved envious at the news.

"He probably just threatened her into granting permission," Ron said knowingly.

Draco shot a nervous glance over at Hermione before saying, "That's, er, not at all true."

"Oh, Frankenstein. Why are you like this?" Hermione groaned, one of her stock phrases, while Luna gave him a quiet little applause in the background where Hermione couldn't see.

Draco began that night's Quidditch practice reenergized, as much by defiance as anything else. He had spent a great deal of time poring through the German Quidditch plays, and come up with a radical tactical program for Slytherin. In the blue loop, fifth year's strategy had been dominated by dogging Gryffindor practices, cursing their players in the halls, and dirty play during the actual match. They had lost the match, and had the worst Quidditch season Draco had ever played, losing not just to Gryffindor but Hufflepuff, even though Draco had caught the Snitch in the latter match. If he wanted to change the past in this, he needed a new strategy, a very Slytherin one still: not merely ruthlessness, but cunning.

"Quadraurum!" Draco cast. The night air around them filled with net-like markings in three dimensions of a golden grid. The grid came to life between all of their hovering forms on their brooms, making Vince yelp and nearly fall off his broom before an exasperated Millie sent out a charm to steady him. The squares stretched out all along the Quidditch pitch in an orb around the main area between the hoops, and then in a darker gold up very high and all the way to the ground and the Quidditch stands. The spell sent more than enough of a glow to light up the whole pitch at night, and with the way the gold stood out against the sky this way, it made practicing this late an actual benefit.

"We're practicing with this on the air now!" he proclaimed, and their confused objections were silenced when Blaise called out from the stands that he thought it might be a good idea.

Draco had learned the grid spell from the professional materials Krum had sent him. Over the following practices, the spell proved invaluable in teaching and running prefigured attacking plays, many also from Krum's papers, that he had chosen as the basis of their strategy. It proved more of a difficulty getting the team to commit to it than actually making it happen. Once they bought in, all of the team, even Vince and Greg, turned out to be unexpectedly clever when it came to learning the prearranged motions, what Millie had taken to calling automations. For the automations that didn't involve her, she would sit back in front of the hoops and bark out advice and corrections, and be the one to call out their code for which automation. They changed all the codes each week, just in case.

Blaise often came to practice, which turned out a boon rather than a hindrance. Between bouts of studying by candle, he offered comments on their coordination and pace from the stands. He also took part in running everyone over the automations, before and after, which soon became a regular sound in their dorm.

Blaise's disapproving glares if anyone got it wrong were motivation enough for Vince and Greg to study far harder than they ever had for classes, Vanishing any notes they made after each usage. Draco never would have thought it possible to get Vince and Greg to play their Beater roles zonally, with a clear positional sense, but with practice three times a week and Blaise's approval on the line, slowly but surely, they had learned. Not as naturally as they had taken to the tactical and not-so-tactical fouling practiced biweekly in the blue loop, but they'd learned.

Just as slow but sure, the Kingsnakes took shape, as Draco began calling them. It had been Blaise's childish nickname for all of them when they were little, and Blaise had stopped using it by the time they were ten. But Draco had honestly thought it was kind of cool, ever since Theo explained that kingsnakes were the species known for eating other snakes, even bigger ones. Something in their psychological make-up seemed to have been marked by being called kingsnakes enough at an early age. They all still reacted to it reflexively, the girls as much as the boys, with Millie saying she loved being called a king. Pansy said Millie was a queen already, so she was *both*, and Astoria laughed about how that went without saying...

If their team already had to be different than any other Slytherin team before them, the least Draco could do was help them feel cool about it with intelligent branding.

The negative side effect was that coining a nickname made more such appellations follow. Having heard Gryffindors call him Frankenstein, Theo was not slow to give Draco an alternative, some sort of claiming him back. From Theo and thus all of Draco's yearmates, who were becoming distressingly close to something he could call friends again, the title he earned was Grindelwald.

Professor Malfoy

Chapter Notes

Hello all! Thanks so much for all of your questions and comments! BTW, Neville does not have a crush on Draco lol. The line about him being happy they were no longer talking about crushes was because he has a crush on Luna, and didn't want anyone realizing it.

Anyway, enjoy! <3

Playlist

The version of the Room of Requirement that Hermione requested looked almost exactly like it had all through sixth-year, with Draco struggling to make the vanishing cabinet work. The only difference was the presence of anti-dark magic sensors- *rude*- and various books. Hermione was thrilled to see them, and immediately pulled *Jinxes for the Jinxed* down to read. After all, she did have half an hour before the others were supposed to arrive. But then she hesitated, put it down, and turned to Draco with that look like she had something to say he wouldn't like.

When she said they had to talk about Harry, he assumed it was about the conversation in front of Honeydukes over who fancied who, and Hermione's continued unspoken but stubborn conviction that Harry and Draco were in love. But she had an even more disturbing request to make of him, one he was hardly equipped to deal with when already struggling with the room. He'd been cocky about it before entering, but all his time being fine in it had been in the small, obsidian egg-shaped dueling room, not this larger Room of Requirement proper. That had sent his pulse racing in a way that had him gulping down both the draughts of peace he had on hand.

He still was convinced he could smell something burning, or the flesh of something burned long ago and left in the heaps of discarded things all about the cavernous room. Something in him said Vince's body was there, though he had just spent two hours yesterday yelling at him during Quidditch practice to stop hitting the Bludgers at Greg, and ineptly flirting at Millie instead of trying to stop the Chasers in their scrimmage.

"Those large notebooks with all those invisible ink," Hermione began. "You have at least a dozen of them, don't you? And you told me once that one of them is all about Occlumency."

Draco regretted even explaining to Hermione what Occlumency was. The last thing he needed right now was to think of that subject, and be reminded *how* he had learned it, why, and with *whom*. "Yeah, I have plenty of notebooks. One of them is just about blood magic, you think that means I'm any good at *that*, or I've ever used it?" Okay, terrible example.

"Harry," she whispered, looking around to make sure no one was coming in, "Has been having terrible nightmares since the graveyard, you know that, don't you? And it's not just that. He's been getting these... these flashes... he wouldn't want me to tell you, but he's been having flashes of strange feelings- aggressive ones- from outside of himself. And when his scar hurts, sometimes, he can feel what the Dark Lord is feeling. This time, it was anger."

"Are you sure that's not just him being depressed and blaming it on old snake-face?" Draco quipped, and Hermione silenced him with a disapproving look. Draco sat down beside her on the pillows set out on the floor, picking one up to chuck at her, but her still-grave face showed him she was in no mood for games.

"Before, it was happiness. In Umbridge's office, so it definitely wasn't Harry feeling it," she said crossly. "Something about his connection to the Dark Lord deepened after what happened in that graveyard. I think it must have something to do with the blood magic ritual. And there's no telling that connection doesn't go both ways." It did send a shiver through Draco, the thought of Voldemort having watched Harry give Draco a pep talk after Slytherin Quidditch tryouts were a bust, or, more seriously, watching Harry make a start at assembling Dumbledore's Army.

"What do you want *me* to do about it?" Draco complained, and wilted at the look she gave him. She really wasn't taking any of his bullshit these days, not when it came to something as important as the war to come. "Okay, fine, I guess maybe Occlumency could help... who knows, though, this connection could operate on an entirely different plane of reference... but what, you want me to get him books on it or something? Because it's not like I can *teach* him-
"

"Why not?" Hermione protested, looking around again before whispering, "You helped him with dueling, and without that, he wouldn't have survived against the Dark Lord in that graveyard." She ignored Draco's attempt to tell her that trust him, Harry definitely would have, and grabbed at his hand with real fear in her eyes. "He needs you, Draco. It's not good for him, having the Dark Lord in his head. I think it's changing him. Or haven't you noticed how different he's been this year?"

"He's been more angry and depressed," Draco said, rolling his eyes, "Because he's been through some shit. He feels guilty the Dark Lord is back, he blames himself, half the school thinks he's an axe murderer, Dumbledore is ghosting him, Umbridge has it in for him, OWLs are coming and he's not ready at all, and oh, yeah, the person he likes won't reciprocate his- his attachment- which is exactly why he doesn't need *me* all up in his head-"

Hermione gave him her most judgmental look. "I don't know how it works, Draco, but honestly, romantic feelings, whatever they are- they really don't matter right now. What matters is the threat of the Dark Lord. Everything else is just background noise."

Their friends began showing up, first Ron and Luna and Neville, exclaiming how much bigger Draco had conjured this room than the one for their duel. Then the guest of honor himself appeared, and then it was Gryffindors incoming, and other houses- perfect attendance, after Draco made a stack of his Polaroids and put each in another stack once their

owner arrived. Enough of them oohed and ahhed over the room that it became too much trouble to try and explain to each one, no, he hadn't personally created this room, just showed it to the others. If it made everyone feel better to think Draco that powerful, let them.

Draco got up, but lounged against a wall in the back of the group, once Hermione called the meeting to order. Everyone gave obligatory compliments to the room, and then Hermione insisted they officially elect a leader. Draco lazily raised his hand to vote Harry along with the rest, and then the name came up. Cho Chang suggested Defense Association, DA for short, as an acronym to keep it all secret. But it was Ginny Weasley to suggest they make it stand for Dumbledore's Army. "Because that's the Ministry's worst fear, isn't it?" she said, and earned a big laugh.

Draco raised his hand numbly for the suggestion, along with everyone else, and just like that, they were all nominal soldiers in an army. He didn't know why he felt so low, just because Ginny was the one to pick that fateful name. It had been inevitable, that sooner or later Ginny would come into more prominence, start doing things to gain Harry's attention, with this surely the first of many, as he fell in love with a girl who conveniently made the Weasleys his in-laws and Ron his brother. And Draco *belonged* in the background for that, letting whatever bizarre infatuation for a Malfoy that Harry had mistaken for love wash away, and give Harry the real thing with this pretty, clever girl.

Draco could have laughed until he cried when their first task was, naturally, pairing up with each other and practicing Expelliarmus. Neville looked towards Luna, but she had already trotted over to Draco. Neville ended up with Harry instead, which at least guaranteed Harry should have the chance to demonstrate a successful disarming spell before Neville could stop him. Except there was no demonstration, bizarrely enough. Harry just told them to have at it.

"Wait, Luna," Draco hissed, as she was in the process of raising her wand.

"I'm going to get you, Draco!" she called joyfully.

"If you disarm me," Draco hissed, "This is important, Luna, just *leave* it. Don't touch it or it will burn you. I'll pick it back up myself. Levitate it into your pocket if you want to keep it. I don't want your hand getting burned like Uncle Sirius's did."

"Okay," Luna said. "Expelliarmus!" Draco's wand flew neatly towards her, and she stopped it in the air rather than touch it. As Draco had suspected, she was already beyond the magical level of this club, at least at the start. Draco was as well, and the hardest thing for either of them was just making sure Luna remembered not to touch Draco's wand.

Around them, though, it was chaos, so much so that it was hard to be reminded of the vanishing cabinet or Fiendfyre anymore. There were so many *children* around, preparing for war and yet not understanding what that meant, as red sparks and wands flew everywhere, and laughter hung in the air like a counter-curse to whatever darkness awaited them.

A highlight was when Neville caught Harry unawares and managed to disarm him. "I DID IT!" Neville exclaimed. "I've never done it before- I DID IT!"

"Good one!" Harry said, and set Neville taking turns to practice with Ron and Hermione, so he could go around inspecting the progress of all of the pairs.

"Good one, Neville!" Luna called brightly, and making Neville turn and stare. When Ron's disarming spell hit Neville, he fell right over.

Harry seemed reluctant to come up to Draco and Luna, but eventually sidled over, after hitting every other pair at least twice. "Hey," Harry said with an awkward little wave. "Listen, I, uh, I know this is way too basic for you, Draco, and maybe you too, Luna, but..."

"Practice is always good," Draco said practically, and Luna bounced excitedly in place.

"No, it's so fun!" Luna exclaimed. "It's more like a game of reflexes. It's like Muggles'-"

She looked to Draco quizzically, and he supplied the word he had learned from watching Muggle films with Mr. Granger. "Quick draw," he said, and Harry nodded, explaining the concept for those listening. "Luna's wicked quick, actually."

"Are you sure you're not letting her win?" Harry said in his ear, too softly for Luna to hear.

"No, I'm not," Draco laughed. "My reflexes are shit, Harry, especially compared to yours."

"Let's see it, then," Ron called. "Draco vs. Luna! Expelliarmus Quick Draw!" Most of the others gathered around. Fred and George seemed to be trying to get together some betting quickly, but no one wanted to bet against Draco. Draco and Luna both put their wands back in their robe pockets, then grinned at each other. "Okay. Ready... set... go!"

"EXPELLIARMUS!" both Draco and Luna shouted, but Luna was just a second faster, and his wand came flying to her feet. She left it, and Draco bowed respectfully to her before picking it up himself. There were gasps and cheers, especially from the Ravenclaws. The high five Luna gave Cho Chang's friend seemed to strike her as an insult, but Luna was blissfully unaware of the grimacing that followed the action, already turning to Hermione in glee. "Did you see that?"

"That was so cool," Neville said, with eyes like saucers.

Harry led the applause for Luna, before noticing that the time was already ten past nine. He sent the enthusiastic group away, setting next Wednesday night for the second meeting, and then began to use the Marauder's Map to send the others out in small groups by house, careful not to get anyone caught. When the only people who remained were him and the trio, Ron began to say goodbye to Draco, only for Hermione to elbow him in the ribs. "Ron and I will be fine going back on our own. Draco, you had something to talk to Harry about, didn't you?"

The only possible answer to that was agreement. "See, you can take Draco down to the dungeons in your cloak after," Hermione said reasonably, appealing to Harry's savior side, "It's too far for him, he'd definitely get caught otherwise." She took Ron out with her.

"She's right, I'll take you," Harry said, fidgeting where he stood, and Draco tried not to stare at the Room of Requirement around them, far more like he remembered with it almost empty.

At least the state of the books strewn all over the room made it clear there had been people in here in numbers, activity other than a mission for Voldemort or the demise of Slytherin's best Beater. "So what did you want to talk to me about?" Harry looked both scared and hopeful.

"I'm not sure if Hermione's talked to you about it," Draco said warily, and then sat on one of the pillows, gesturing Harry over. Harry sat obediently, and Draco stared at the sight of their legs stretched out beside each other's. "She's got more up her sleeve than just this little army, you know."

"No," Harry said, adjusting his glasses before regarding Draco with the utmost attention.

"She's told me about this," Draco said, reaching out and poking at Harry's scar, "And this," he said, tapping his forehead, "And this," he said, making evil swooping claw hands and hissing noises with his tongue. Harry seemed to follow along at the start and get lost, though he laughed at Draco's snake impression. "Basically, she told me you have the Dark Lord in your head, and she wants me to teach you Occlumency to get him out. So if you want, I'm down for that."

"Okay," Harry said slowly. "Is this like the dueling lessons last year?"

"Kind of," Draco said, grimacing. "I don't think you're going to enjoy them so much."

"Hermione said Occlumency is a magical thought control shielding thing. Keeping intrusion and meddling out of your head," Harry said tentatively, and Draco explained the rest of it. Harry looked dubious by the time he finished.

"So how would I learn that?" Harry asked. "How would we practice? Would you... would you have to try and get into my head? You could see what I was thinking?"

"It's not thoughts. It's more like memories and feelings. Hopefully no more than necessary," Draco said, trying to ignore the way Harry was flushing. "The idea is for you to try and build up strong shields around your mind, so you can repel any intruders. Me or the Dark Lord. It's a lot of meditation and visualization-"

"That sounds awful," Harry sighed. "So you can do this? How did you learn?"

Draco couldn't exactly say, *Aunt Bella is a hell of a teacher. Pain is a powerful motivator.* He was going to have to emulate her example with Harry, without the negative reinforcement that had made her teaching so effective. In short, he didn't have much faith in how this was going to go. "I had lessons a long time ago. And no, I'm not telling you who." Harry opened his mouth to protest, and Draco rolled his eyes. "Just add that to the list of all the other things I haven't told you, alright?"

Harry agreed, reluctant at first, but then he seemed to realize it meant extra time alone with Draco, and that perked him right up. They set Monday nights for their Occlumency lessons, just like they'd had dueling ones on Mondays last year. "Something to look forward to, even with the weekend over," Harry said, and Draco heaved a sigh.

"Trust me, you are not going to be looking forward to this for long."

Harry bit his lip, eyes sparkling at Draco with an unusual bit of impishness. "Whatever you say. You're the boss, Professor Malfoy."

Draco wished he could shove off this responsibility on somebody, anybody else. But the only other real Occlumens he knew at Hogwarts was Severus. And the idea of *him* giving Harry Occlumency lessons seemed likely to end in nothing but bloodshed.

So he went through his Occlumency notebook. It proved to be more theory than anything useful, except some recollections of lessons and sayings he'd copied down from Aunt Bella. It was surreal in a way few things were now, having had years to get used to the red line: desperately struggling to remember everything Aunt Bella had taught him in order to help *Harry Potter* with it.

He had a lesson plan made up, at least, by the next Monday at 8, though it was without a sheet like the dueling lessons, nor did he show any of it to Harry. "Trust me," Draco said, "This is harder than any spell I taught you in dueling. Maybe all of them together." He didn't know if Harry's natural ability with magic could extend to magical mental discipline. He performed well in classes, but that was more raw talent than academic focus. Draco would have to hope Harry would be better at this than he feared. If not, they could be spending a lot of Monday nights together.

"Okay," Draco said, as they paced in front of the statue for the Room of Requirement. "I'm going to need a small room. Somewhere different from the room for DA. Maybe a fireplace, comfortable chairs, not too much decoration, somewhere easy to focus..." Draco concentrated, and when the door opened, the room was very much as he had described.

It was less than half the size even of the dueling room, with a fireplace towering all the way to the ceiling that looked very much with its black snake designs like Severus's original one, pre-liquid Fiendfyre. Its fires were green like that charmed one, the floors and walls all dark green and bronze, with a large black rug before the fire. The only decoration was a chandelier hanging from the high ceiling, picking up some of the emerald firelight. In front of it, facing each other closely, were two tall-backed plush armchairs, one green and one red. Draco walked in and took the green one, scooting it back from the red one a little further. Save the color, it reminded him of a cross between Severus's chambers, and the place in the Manor where he had used to practice with Aunt Bella.

"Your room-conjuring is so cool," Harry said wide-eyed, and Draco pointed to the red chair.

Harry sat down obligingly, looking more impressed by the intimate setting than the task at hand. Draco had his lesson plans stored in his head, having spent far more time thinking about this than paying attention in any of his classes today- not great for Arithmancy and Ancient Runes, which he was taking for the first time, but what was *ever* as interesting as Harry Potter?

"Get comfortable," Draco advised him. "All the work is going to be in your mind."

Draco was hardly comfortable. It was an odd kind of prolonged whiplash in his mood, the reminder of his lessons with Aunt Bella and all the times the Cruciatus curse had awaited his failures, mixed with the feeling it put deeper in his chest, to have the excuse to stare this close at Harry's lovely face swam over by the flickering emerald brilliance of the fire.

Harry sagged back in his crimson chair, and followed Draco's example, kicking off his shoes before they began. "Okay," said Draco. "So there are ways this is similar to resisting the Imperius curse, which you're good at. It does involve pushing someone else's magic out of you, and having raw magical strength and strength of will *can* help with that. But it's also about mental *calm.* You can use emotions to get out from under the Imperius. The feeling of that is like defiance, right, or anger? Same as you can use other emotions to power a Patronus. But this is the opposite. You have to be able to shut yourself down entirely. Your mind has to stop *being* your mind. It has to be a weapon. A weapon isn't attacked. A weapon does the attacking."

Draco found himself repeating Aunt Bella's first explanation to him almost word-for-word. He remembered her producing a slender, sharp obsidian dagger then, which glittered in the firelight. As it happened, he had a dagger of his own. He pulled out the long, pale moonstone dagger that Periander had left him, and held it up in the firelight like she had. "Look at this. This is a weapon, right?"

Harry nodded, though the question seemed obvious.

"It was made to cut. Sometimes it can be sharper or duller, but that doesn't change its nature. A knife is a knife. It cuts things. It doesn't *get* cut. Your mind penetrates other minds, it isn't broken into. If you try and stab a knife," Draco explained, grabbing Harry's hand and pressing his index finger like another knife to the flat of the blade, "All you come up against is flat metal. There's only a surface. Like the front wall of a castle that can never be besieged, because it's a facade. There's nothing behind. Most powerful magic starts with visualization, and that's where Occlumency starts. You have to turn your mind into a blade. And a blade doesn't have feelings. The person who wields it can stab with emotion, but the knife won't feel a thing, no matter where it goes or what it does. It serves its purpose, that's all. Its only job is to stay sharp."

So become a blade or be cut, he mouthed, finishing Aunt Bella's words in his own head.

"Um..." Harry said, tentatively raising a hand, and Draco rolled his eyes.

"You don't need to raise your hand, Harry. We're literally the only two people here."

"Sorry," Harry said, and then forced a cheeky grin. "Just don't want to interrupt if you're not done talking, Professor Malfoy. I want to be a good student for you."

"Well," Draco said dryly, "What does the teacher's pet have to ask Professor Malfoy?"

Harry looked kind of sheepish. "Er, that all sounds, like, very deep and everything, but what does it actually mean I'm supposed to do? Is there a spell I can cast or something?"

"No, I'll be the one casting a spell," Draco told him, "Legilimens, trying to get inside your mind, and you'll be trying to get me out again. People can do Legilimency- that's the name for the mental intrusion part, as opposed to the shielding against it- without casting a spell sometimes, if they're strong, or they don't want to go too deep. Sometimes, you won't even know your mind's been penetrated. So we'll practice you trying to stop me-"

"But what if I want to do the penetrating?" Harry blurted, and then turned beet red and fell completely silent.

Draco stared at him in stunned silence himself, trying to pretend he couldn't hear the implications, then burst out laughing, leaning forward and clutching onto Harry's knees to brace himself as his shoulders shook. "Bloody hell, Harry. Your mind. I'm almost afraid to go in now. I'm sorry, teacher's pet, but when it comes to Occlumency, I'm the only one doing any *penetrating*."

"Okay, yeah, sorry," Harry muttered, and buried his face in his hands.

"You're not going to be able to do that," Draco laughed. "Eye contact makes this work better. And I'm obviously not as powerful a Legilimens as the Dark Lord, so we'll need me as strong as we can get to approximate anything like he can do to you, even from a long distance-"

"Are you going to be in my dreams?" Harry blurted. "I have dreams with him. If you get in my mind, will I have dreams of you all the time now too?"

Draco fought the urge to ask, *You don't ever dream of me already?* Instead, Draco kept his hands on Harry's knees, and just stared deeply into his eyes. "No reason you should. Okay, focus, and try and imagine your mind is a knife. It helps if you organize your memories, thoughts, and emotions into separate categories. Or past, present, and future- imagination would go with future. You can do a mind palace if you want-"

"A what?" Harry asked, and Draco patiently explained.

"Fold them," Draco instructed after. "Fold everything into the facets of the knife. That's how it works, you know, blacksmithing, at least in the old Muggle style. Folding metal over and over until it has enough density to cut and stab through something." He held up the dagger, and Harry stared at it in fascination.

"What is that dagger? Is it magic? Where did you get it? What are all those stones-"

"Harry," Draco sighed, "The point of this exercise is *focus*."

"Right!" Harry yelped. "Visualization. My mind is folding into a knife blade. Right."

Draco gave him as long as he needed, until he claimed he was successfully imagining his mind as a knife. "You have to be imagining it's a knife from inside the knife, though," Draco advised, "Not outside looking at a knife. You know what the knife looks like, yes, but you're at a location on it, or just comprising all of it. A knife looking out at the fire," he said, turning it to show off the green reflections in his hand. The moonstones seemed to pulse into white

opals in the light. "If you have a consciousness separate from your visualization, that's still a presence that can be cut into..."

"Okay," Harry said, taking a deep breath. "I'm ready."

"When you feel me try to intrude," Draco instructed, "Keep imagining your mind as the dagger, with my attempt bouncing off the surface, or try to wield the dagger against me, pushing back to stab at the intruder and drive them out. Alright?" Harry nodded.

"Legilimens!" Draco cast, and images immediately began to rush through his own head, as he plunged deep into what felt like a pure golden mass of power. But the visions that lived in the marrow of that gold structure- the backbones of its construction, like nerve endings a touch triggered and sent electricity all through the web of membranes- those were anything but moments of power.

He saw out of Harry's eyes when he was very small, watching a similarly smaller version of that round-faced blond boy from his Muggle family, the name Dudley attached to that sneering superior face, riding some bright red vehicle. The sight of it filled Harry with jealousy, with a rejection that Draco could taste so thick on his tongue it was like bile corroding it.

The bicycle turned to a dog, a hideous great dog with the name Ripper attached, which was soon moving faster than the bicycle, chasing Harry when he was taller along suburban grass, until Harry ran into a tree and was scrambling up out of the way to the sound of his whole family's derisive laughter, the repulsive wet animal smell of the dog's saliva hanging in the air as Ripper panted up the tree after Harry, eager to bite onto what even the dog could tell was the unwanted one of the family.

With the memories coming in faster flashes, Draco felt a pair of fingers, smaller and stubbier, gripping into the edge of a stool with the entire Great Hall before Harry watching, blocked off by the dark felt of the Sorting Hat over his vision. Draco could hear Harry's voice in his own head chanting *Not Slytherin, not Slytherin, not Slytherin...*

"Not Slytherin, eh? said the voice of the Hat. "Are you sure? You could be great, you know, it's all here in your head, and Slytherin will help you on the way to greatness..."

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!" Harry yelled, standing alone at the entrance to Slytherin house, while screams of terror resounded from inside. Hermione was leading out a string of first-years in emerald-green pajamas, half of them crying or swaying on their feet, up towards the stairs out of the dungeons.

"Harry, are you alright?" Hermione was calling, her face red from running so much. Then she stopped to stare, her face going slack with awe for a moment, staring at the shape of the bright light from the end of Harry's wand, which went from pure silver-blue radiance to a shape like a deer, antlers forming before an entire body was forged out of light.

Then the stag was charging at the Dementors in righteous fury, a brilliant light still flanking it as Hermione began to lead the procession of Slytherins out of harm's way again, more Dementors streaming out of the common room after the fleeing students. But when they tried

to follow, Harry was there with his Patronus, wand raised high in defiance of all of the Dementors' seeping cold, and hundreds of leering dark forms fled in the face of the stag...

"Guess I'm ready to walk past the Dementors now in style," Draco saw himself drawling, with Harry's fingers tracing through Draco's hair and not wanting to leave. But Draco looked different in Harry's eyes than he would have imagined himself, almost like an angel. Harry didn't want to stop touching that halo of white-gold hair, fine and feathery as angel wings, as bright and sleek as pure light under his fingers...

"You kind of look like the opposite of a Dementor," Harry said, with immediate mortification hitting him, wondering why he had said that, when Draco was... Draco would think... when Harry didn't, he couldn't- and Draco would *never*...

Draco cried out, rearing backwards as a rush of wind pushed his heavy armchair back several inches, breaking the eye contact and forcing him out of Harry's mind. "Oh, God," Harry said, grasping at his head. "Oh, *God*. What did you *see*..."

"Flashes," Draco said, forcing himself to breathe. "Flashes of your memories, Harry, that's all. Now calm down and try and focus. I think we're going to be working on this for a very long time."

It turned out, as Draco had feared, that Harry was far better at dueling than Occlumency. All his speed and reflexes did nothing for him, nor even his raw power. It was hard to conceive just how Harry's mind could be so emotional each time he pressed inside it, though Harry sometimes muttered things about Draco making it worse, saying it was just impossible to focus around *Draco.* Draco called that a weak excuse and kept on pushing.

Occlumency lessons seemed lackluster to him without punishments, in truth. Draco wondered if they would be progressing more if he had been replicating Aunt Bella to a tee. But that wasn't an option, so they maintained a snail pace of improvement, if any. Harry was turning out better at bursts of uncontrolled magic to get Draco out than doing it mentally himself. And the Dark Lord was not going to be present for those physical bits of magic, at least for the most part. Nor was he likely to strike when Harry had any of the awareness needed to explode in retaliation, coming instead when he was unawares or asleep.

DA was more successful in comparison, with Harry visibly growing into his role as a Defense teacher. He was already better than any they'd had but Remus, and Harry had Remus's example to remember, as they met once a week on various days to learn more defense spells. Hermione had gotten them the DA coins with the Protean charm on them to signal meetings. Draco took and used his without protest, trying and mainly succeeding at not thinking of how he'd used the charm himself with an Imperiused Madam Rosmerta. Generally, he was content taking a backseat role, hoping to blend in so much he could eventually just stop coming, and the only person who would notice he was gone was his usual partner, Luna. Which would mean Neville would finally have a partner.

Luna was the first one of their partnership to bail, though, skipping a meeting near the end of October with the excuse she wasn't feeling well. Draco harangued her about it until Hermione

pulled him aside into the stacks and hissed that Luna was having terrible menstrual cramps, at which Draco apologized and quickly left it alone. It meant that Draco and Neville were paired up, and as it so happened, today they were to be learning the Reductor curse.

Great. At least it would likely be a *speedy* death.

The opposite problem was in play, though, as he and Neville floated objects before each other. Draco would cleanly reduce his to smithereens, only for the one Draco floated Neville to just hang there in infinite suspension, occasionally twisting or letting out a little smoke. Draco forced Neville through a very minute, centimeter-by-centimeter practice of the form of the wand motion, then the pronunciation of the incantation, and then onto ways to safely increase the amount of magical power he was putting behind a spell. But Draco concluded by the end of the frustrating meeting that the issue was not magical but mental.

"I probably just scare you too much, Neville, you'll do fine next time if you're paired with Luna," Draco told him as they headed towards the exit. They had to mill around, waiting for Hermione with the Marauder's Map to direct them out in turn.

"But being paired with Luna scares me even more," Neville said softly, and Draco had to pretend he hadn't heard that.

"Are you scared of hurting me with it," Draco asked skeptically, "Or scared of what I'll do in retaliation if you hurt me? Or just, like, I don't know, scared of explosions? Because you are scared, Neville. That much I can tell. I haven't spent four years watching you cringe away from Professor Snape in Potions class not to know what it looks like when you're afraid."

"I don't know!" Neville exclaimed, looking frustrated to the point of tears. "I don't know, I just- Hermione, can I please just go-"

"Oh, no you don't," Draco drawled, and hauled Neville back in by his collar. "Harry!" he called, and Harry looked sulky but obeyed when Draco asked for him to leave them there, and leave them his cloak.

"Why are we staying in your conjured room?" Neville asked nervously. "Are you going to conjure something to punish me because I can't do Reducto? Or for always being so scared, when I'm supposed to be a Gryffindor-"

"We're going to have a conversation," Draco said, and Neville stared in incomprehension. "A discussion, man to man. We're going to sit down and talk about *feelings*, Neville Longbottom."

Neville stared at him suspiciously. "I feel like you're *saying* that," he said slowly, "But then you're just going to curse me. That would make more sense."

"And yet," Draco said languidly, "Here I am," and sat himself on one of the cushions, pulling a pile against the wall for them to sit on together like he did sometimes with Harry. It was far more relaxing with Neville. The hyper-awareness of the location of every one of his limbs was missing. "Sitting here waiting for you to talk to me. Come, young Gryffindor. Unburden yourself to Professor Malfoy."

Neville sat down, though he looked relieved when the pillows did nothing to him for sitting on them, as if not being cursed was not a right but a privilege, when it came to hanging out with Draco Malfoy. Which was rich, given that Neville had gotten Stinksap in Draco's *hair*, and suffered no less than a mild tongue-lashing. Really, Draco should at the very least have temporarily removed at least one of Neville's eyeballs from their sockets for such an offense.

"What do you want me to say?" Neville asked. "That curse *is* scary, I'm worried I'll hurt someone... and you told me once you were sure I belonged in Gryffindor, that it would just take time, but I'm still so scared of everything, I'm sorry... I don't know why I'm even in Gryffindor..."

"Did the hat not tell you why?" Draco asked curiously. "You almost had a hat stall, didn't you? You and Hermione both took a while. And hey, mine took way longer, so no judgment here. What was it between, Gryffindor and Hufflepuff? How did it end up giving you Gryffindor?"

"What was yours between?" Neville asked stubbornly. "Tell me first."

Draco sighed. "You really wanna know? Nothing. It said I wasn't suited to any of the houses. That's why it took so long. Because the hat didn't think I was good enough for any of them."

"No way," Neville breathed. "But you're so good at magic! How did you end up in Slytherin, then? Just because your family had been in it, did the hat put you there?"

"No, I just kept asking and asking it for Slytherin, and eventually, it gave in."

"That was what it was like for me," Neville admitted. "I've told everyone it took so long because it wanted Gryffindor and I kept asking for Hufflepuff, but- please don't tell anyone, but it was the other way around. The hat wanted Hufflepuff more, I think. It was leaning that way, but I just kept insisting Gryffindor, because my parents had been in Gryffindor." His voice cracked, and he stared down at his hands. "I've thought so many times I've made a mistake, that I would have fit better in Hufflepuff. But I wanted to be like my parents."

Draco's throat went tight. "Frank and Alice Longbottom," he said, compelled despite himself to offer some small show of respect. "They were a great witch and wizard. Great Aurors."

Neville shot him a glance. "Do you... you... oh, no, you know what happened to them, don't you?" he said, voice breaking again, and first his hands began to shake, then his shoulders.

Draco'd had no idea Neville would be this sensitive about his parents. It just made him feel worse, as if Draco had personally been the one to take them from him. "I do, Neville. I'm sorry. You know who my family is. I knew before I ever met you. But I've never said anything to anyone, not even my cousin..."

"Please don't," Neville said, looking up suddenly with tears in his eyes. "Please don't tell Luna. Or anyone. I don't want people to know. I mean, I'm proud of them, but they're just stuck in St. Mungo's, they have been my whole life, they're alive but they're just not *there*- I visit them every Christmas and summer-" Tears were streaming down his face. "I shouldn't have kept asking to be a Gryffindor. But I guess I just thought that somehow, someday, if they

knew I was a Gryffindor like them, they'd be proud of me..." Neville buried his face in his hands. A miserable guilty impulse made Draco reach out and rub Neville's back, as comforting as a Malfoy could ever be.

"The Slytherins know," Draco said suddenly, remembering. He knew it would make it worse, but he had to tell Neville. He should have when it happened, but he'd been too wrapped up in his own self-pity. "All the Slytherins in my year know."

Neville's gaze lifted up in alarm. "Did you tell them?"

"No," Draco said grimly. "The fake Mad-Eye Moody did. Last year, in Defense class. *Just* the Slytherins in my year," he hastened to add, as if that made it any better. "But they won't talk about it. I made them promise not to."

Neville looked so unjustifiably grateful, it was agony to behold. "Thank you, Draco. I can't believe you would do that for me..."

It all came out then, as Draco's self-preservation instincts were superseded by something deeper. He reached into his pocket, pulled out the talon wand, and laid it before him. "No, Neville. Don't think I'm that selfless. I did it for myself. Crouch was talking about it because this is the wand that did it to your parents."

Neville's face took a long time to process the information, as he tried to wipe tears away to look properly. Once he did, he looked no more comprehending. "No, isn't that *your* wand, Draco? It's got that bent shape no one else's has, it's definitely yours..."

"Neville," Draco said, digging his nails into his palms, and forced out the words. "That wand was in my family. I used it before I ever got a wand of my own, and it chose me, it's the only wand that works for me. I don't have a choice, it's that or be a Squib- Neville, I'm *sorry*, I'm sorry that this is my wand, I'm sorry that it's the wand that..."

"What are you talking about?"

"The wand I use was my aunt's," Draco admitted, "Bellatrix Lestrange," and then he could see Neville understood from the way he jerked back. Not necessarily from Draco, but the wand itself, as if something dark and horrible had suddenly hissed into the room, a malevolent ghost that *would* have its due. Neville stared down at the talon wand in mute horror for some time.

Finally, he wiped his eyes again, clearing his throat. "You're- you're sure, Draco? You wouldn't make something like this up... why would you... that's really... that's the wand that tortured my parents until they... they..."

"She did it with other Death Eaters," Draco said wearily. "Her husband, his brother, Barty Crouch Jr. Aunt Bella was the ringleader, though, by all accounts, yeah. She had a Cruciatus on her like..." *Like your insides have decided they don't want to live there anymore.* "Like no one else."

"And that was the wand," Neville said, staring at it like he wanted to touch it, but was afraid to, and honestly, Draco wasn't sure it would be the best idea for anyone involved. "That's the wand that cast Crucio, over and over, on my father and mother."

"Yeah," Draco said, and took the plunge. He felt lightheaded as he spoke the words, at their heedlessness of the future, but he meant them. He'd used to think he'd sooner lose Hermione or Severus than the talon wand, but that had been before he had accomplished what he'd been sent back in the past to do. He had gotten Sirius free, and everything after that was just a bonus. He wasn't necessary anymore, and whatever happened, happened.

"Try the Reductor curse on *that*, Neville. I'm serious. If you want to, cast Reducto and see if you can turn that wand to dust."

"What are you talking about?" Neville gasped, scooting away further on the pillows, and this time it did seem to be away from Draco as well.

"I mean," Draco said with a rueful smile, "It's evil, isn't it? It's a powerful wand. And that's my power, Neville, *that's* why I'm so good at magic, like you said. And that's why the hat still didn't think I belong anywhere, because it's a *stolen* power. And an evil one, the most evil one under the sun, so if you want to destroy it for what it was used for, you should-"

"You'd be a *Squib*?" Neville said disbelievingly. "Merlin, Draco, put your wand away." He wasn't crying anymore. He looked more worried about Draco than himself. "Stop talking nonsense. I would never do that to you. Wands are wands, aren't they? It's who wields them that matters."

Draco obeyed, feeling slightly numb, before the feel of that familiar bent shape settling into place where it belonged sent a bone-deep wave of relief through him. He stroked his fingers over the bend in it inside his pocket, lying to it, telling it, *I'm sorry, I didn't really mean it, I knew he wouldn't, I wouldn't have let him anyway.* "I can understand if you don't want to be friends now."

"I didn't think we were friends before?" Neville said awkwardly, and then touched Draco's arm with real concern in his eyes. "But I want to be. And Draco- come on, don't you care what *happens* to you? You need a wand."

"Maybe I don't," Draco admitted, "Care what happens to me," and now he was the one staring at his hands and avoiding Neville's gaze.

Neville laughed nervously before seeming to realize Draco meant it. Then, in an unexpected shock of warmth, Draco felt Neville's arm go around his shoulder. "You should," said Neville softly. "We need you, you know. I need you. All of us do. Harry most of all."

"Because I have this fucking wand?" Draco snapped, looking up glaring. But his temper didn't make the skittish Neville pull back for once.

"No," Neville said, with a very Gryffindorish faith in his eyes. "Because you're the one who makes us feel brave."

"Quadraurum!" Draco cast.

As usual, he was greeted by a chorus of groans, but Draco had to admire the effect of the golden grid across the night air, making him grateful for the easy application their late-night practices gave it. Not to mention the increased secrecy, but Draco had cast a Caterwauling charm as always in the distance, to make anyone coming within eyeshot of their preparations. With the match tomorrow afternoon, it was all the more vital.

Once they were finished running the plays, and finished their scrimmage with Blaise flown up to play a fourth Chaser and even up numbers, Draco called them all over with his customary phrase, "Hey Kingsnakes!" He waited for Blaise, who could honestly be considered their tactical advisor, or assistant manager, to fly over to join them.

"Okay," Draco said without preamble, "I'm not going to give some big speech, that's for tomorrow, and I can promise you, Kingsnakes, it *will* be one for the history books. But we're all tired and hungry, which is why..." On cue, the gold grid disappeared, to be replaced by a bright, cheery pink light from below. "I'll let Dobby do the talking!"

"Hey Dobby!" Vince and Greg cheered without reservation. The others were still dubious about having an elf attend so many of their practices, at first distrusting his secrecy and then just admitting they found it demeaning and a bit creepy. But when Dobby had started bringing them all extra snacks for 'strength-building' and 'musculature development', Vince and Greg had come quickly over to thinking him one of their very favorite people.

What was really astonishing this time was that Dobby wasn't alone in popping in hauling a table and chairs for them. One elf was Apparating in furniture with him, while a smaller elf was snapping her fingers and over and over, making the large pomegranates they ate for the antioxidants appear in their glorious powdered sugar-covered forms on the waiting plates.

Draco didn't recognize the elves with Dobby, though they looked vaguely familiar. But Pansy seemed to, approaching the three elves slowly, while the others hustled to their places to protect their pomegranates from Vince and Greg, a custom learned out of dire necessity. Blaise nobly protected his girlfriend's pomegranate for her, as he often had to even with her there. Pansy was tired to the bone after practice. She usually was. She and Astoria had lacked much of the physical conditioning needed to play Chaser this often, and she was taking longer than Astoria to get into shape. But her exhaustion didn't keep her from breathing out in disbelief, "Wooky? Nissy?"

"Mistress Pansy!" Nissy exclaimed, before clamping a hand over her mouth and looking bashful. Wooky took her hand, and they solemnly bowed together, saying "Mistress Pansy, Mistress Pansy," in reverent tones that got the rest of the team's attention.

"I know these elves," Pansy said wonderingly. "You used to leave me extra treats by my pillow, when Mother would put me on those awful diets. I would leave notes for what I wanted, and you'd show up with those sacks full of candied mango, or those floating blood volcanoes..."

With a wave, Wooky indicated a pile of candied mango beside the pomegranate on Pansy's plate. "We have been at Hogwarts for many years, mistress, since the Parkinson family freed us." From Pansy's disconcerted face, it seemed that at her tender age, her family had kept that unpleasant business from her. "And we have not bothered you, mistress... only made sure the menu would have Mistress's favorites sometimes... but when Dobby told us that Mistress Pansy had a Quidditch match tomorrow, we wanted to help! We cannot believe Mistress Pansy is playing for Slytherin!"

"We want you to be winning, Mistress Pansy," Nissy said anxiously. "Dobby said that no one is believing a Slytherin team with girls can win. So Nissy wants Mistress Pansy to prove them wrong. Nissy wants that very, very, very, very, very, very much!"

In between blinking at all the times Nissy had said very, Blaise leaned over and hissed, "Does anyone know what a floating blood volcano is?"

Draco did, albeit from the blue loop. It was far more benign than it sounded. Pansy had gotten her kitchen to make them some, after Draco Flooed over for supper with her parents one summer. But he feigned ignorance with the rest, and then feigned surprise as Nissy snapped her fingers and made the floating blood volcano appear in the air above them. It was an eruption eternally frozen in the instant of happening by house elf magic, a kind of sugared time travel. It was a core of a red gummy center shaped like a heart- not a cartoon heart, but a biological heart with ventricles- expelling a stream of blood-red liquid that was actually thick, syrupy, and cherry-flavored.

Nissy was happy to float it around to let all the Slytherins have licks at the strands of cherry hovering in the air in turn, which grew more delicious as the night air around them made it progressively colder. Draco had to huffily remind them all to eat their pomegranates as well. "You just want the seeds for your rituals," Blaise drawled, as Draco began to pick out the seeds from the fruits that clearly weren't going to get eaten like Pansy's.

"We've all seen you with your nose stuck in that demon goddess book," Theo said, and Draco shot a frantic glance over at Dobby, making Theo laugh. "What, Draco? You're the one who said we can trust him not to spill our team secrets. Now you're worried he'll tell your Gryffindor friends about your secret blood magic?"

"For your information," Draco informed them haughtily, "I do trust Dobby, I just don't want to give him the burden of not telling things to Harry Potter, it makes him sad. And for the record, my Gryffindor friends *know* about my secret blood magic. Well, I mean... some of them do..."

Theo shot him a sharp glance. "You've got a couple of them on that team now, Draco. You're going to have to promise us you won't go easy on them. I'm less worried about Dobby than you."

"Don't worry," Draco vowed. "Tomorrow, I'll show them no mercy."

"Even Harry Potter?" Theo asked carefully, and without hesitation, Draco nodded.

Kingsnakes

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Draco's confidence in his Slytherin ruthlessness was tested just the next morning, when he looked over and saw Ron and Harry arrive in the Great Hall. It was not the striking dark figure Harry cast to test his resolve, but Ron's pale, queasy one, visibly nauseous from anxiety across the hall. Draco was reaching into his pocket to get a Draught of Peace for Ron before he remembered that Ron was the enemy. It wasn't like he had any badges or songs targeting Ron this time, but he knew from years spent of flying together how Ron's nerves worked on their own, with no need for outside stimulae to begin sabotaging him. Even more years had his instincts telling him to feel bad for Ron, to try and offer him help, rather than take it as the advantage it was.

It was, he had found, far easier to have Harry as an enemy than Ron. Harry, he could glare at across the Great Hall without flinching, shooting ominously superior stares, like he knew something he didn't. But when he saw his posing and posturing had been caught by Ron, and just made him hunch over the red and gold-emblazoned table even more like a turtle into its shell, he had to stop. His conscience, the Hermione-voice, had made him stop, while the Severus-voice told him to stop being such a bloody Hufflepuff. He couldn't afford to be so damn soft now.

And he shouldn't have let himself become a spy.

It had begun with good intentions, about an hour before the match, hearing gossip about Sirius Black and their old Defense professor spotted on Hogwarts grounds. The whole school was aflutter with it. Draco happened to have both the invisibility cloak and the Marauder's Map in his possession- he had the vague idea that he'd stayed late after a DA meeting and never given them back to Harry- so he used the map to find Sirius and Remus.

They were in Dumbledore's office, which was reason enough to put on the cloak as he waited outside. He told himself it was to surprise them, not just because the thought of Dumbledore having mere eye contact with him still made Draco's breathing less easy.

When they came out, though, Sirius was angry enough that Draco hesitated to pull the cloak off as planned. Sirius was yelling back towards the office in Dumbledore's direction, while Remus steered him out, a conflicted look on that intelligent face that Draco had missed so much. "Come on, Padfoot," Remus was saying, "We need to get good seats for the match, you were so excited to see Harry and Draco play again- and we can sit together this time-"

"I don't care about this *connection to Voldemort* you say he has now-" Sirius bellowed, and Remus glanced around nervously.

"You can't be yelling about Voldemort in the halls of Hogwarts," Remus cautioned, but Sirius got out more yell before the entrance shut.

"I still want to adopt him anyway!" Sirius called, and then Remus had him out and around the corner, arm wrapped firmly around his shoulders. Draco's feet followed mechanically, listening without a thought of taking off the cloak now.

"Don't say you agree with Albus," Sirius snapped at Remus, coming to a stop in an empty hallway, dark eyes blazing. "It was nonsense in the summer, and it's nonsense now, keeping our distance like this. Whatever the blood ritual did, I'm Harry's godfather. Being free should have meant I could- no, Remus, *listen* to me, I wouldn't have let Grimmauld become the headquarters for the Order, if I had known it meant that Albus wouldn't let us make it Harry's home-"

"You can't be yelling about these things in the open, Sirius," Remus coaxed him, "Anyone could hear," and stroked a propitiating hand down his chest, soft gaze pleading. "Draco's giving him Occlumency lessons, so maybe once Harry improves and stops having these visions, maybe..."

Sirius did seem to soften, but only enough to lower his voice. "He shouldn't have to wait. I wish I could at least tell Harry I've wanted to adopt him, since the day I was freed- sooner-"

"Draco is very talented," Remus sighed, "And Harry is... very eager to impress him. He'll learn from him. Be patient, Sirius... once we know Harry's safe to have close to us, then..."

"I just want us all to be a family," Sirius groaned, and pressed Remus backwards against the wall of the hallway, keeping close to him. Remus smiled at him gently and wrapped his arms around his neck, pulling their foreheads together. They could not have looked any more natural and well-fitted, while Draco stood invisible behind them.

"We'll have that," Remus said firmly, "I promise," and Sirius kissed him, hard enough to press Remus's head back against the stone. Remus sighed and pulled Sirius closer to him, and the last of Sirius's ferocity seemed to dissolve in the kiss.

Not that Draco stuck around to watch. His footsteps took him away very quickly, and not from fear of being late to the start of the match. It was a fury that had him picking up pace until he was practically sprinting once he was far enough out of earshot from them. He pocketed the cloak and ran, ran towards the Slytherin dressing room, towards all the emerald green and silver. Real silver sounded like something he would love to press into Remus's skin at the moment. To say nothing of what he would do to the talon brand on Sirius's hand. And Harry...

Harry who they wanted to *adopt.* To *give a family.* Give *parents.* The three of them. The *three.*

He told himself to be happy for Harry, getting away from those awful Muggles. And Draco... Draco already had parents, so...

He wished for every person he ran past to say some unkind word, pick a fight, any excuse to curse something, or set something on fire. When he made it to the dressing room, even Theo's gorgeous face looked like something he wanted to slice in half.

"Draco?" Theo asked, catching his shoulders. "Are you alright?"

Draco smiled at him in a grin that was scarcely more than baring his teeth. "No mercy, right, Theo? No fucking mercy."

The reception the team received as they walked out onto the frozen grass made the resolution strengthen in him. He had expected the boos and hisses that greeted their arrival, in contrast to the deafening cheers that greeted the team of reigning Gryffindor champions, featuring no less than Harry Potter. But it seemed louder and nastier than usual. There was less of the answering cheering from the Slytherin section to drown it out.

There was *some* cheering from Slytherin, namely by Blaise in the front row, beside Luna in her snake hat. But there were far more boos and hisses from that direction. Not far behind Blaise and Luna were Bletchley, Montague, Pucey, and Warrington, hulking forms instantly recognizable, even if they hadn't been yelling out taunts to draw attention to themselves. Much of their sixth and seventh-year classes seemed happy to join them.

"Kingsnakes!" Draco barked, and his team assembled around him, hunching protectively around each other in much the same sort of huddle that Flint had used to have. Montague had never even had huddles, which as far as Draco was concerned already put Draco ahead of him as a captain. He'd put a lot of thought into his speech, namely when failing to sleep the previous night. He'd considered the message he wanted to get across, the message they would expect, and how to best have the effect he wanted, apart from the cliché of speaking from the heart.

The heart got you nowhere. They were Slytherins.

"So," Draco began, and smiled grimly. Their smiles back were all just as mirthless, the pressure looking a palpable weight on each of their backs. He could have told them that pretty much everyone at Hogwarts was against them, except for Blaise, Luna, and a couple of house elves. How much he wanted it, and how much he knew they all did too. How much they had stacked against them, how much they had to prove... but they knew all that already. So he told them more of what they knew, but with compliments. Slytherins gave them out sincerely so infrequently, he hoped it would do something for them.

"I don't need to tell you, Kingsnakes," Draco began, "That everyone hates us. But that won't touch us. They call us a new team? They're newer than us. We've known each other our whole lives. I know you all have many, many innumerable flaws-" He ignored Greg's mutinous rumblings. "But you know what I know each and every one of you isn't? A wimp! We've got a Keeper whose cat attempts her life on a regular basis, every time she lets that

scoundrel Mr. Wilberforth out of his cage, but did she trade him in for another cat like a fucking coward?"

"No!" the Slytherins chorused, loud enough for the Gryffindor huddle to notice and cast uneasy looks in their direction.

"Yeah," Draco said grimly. "That hatred, that won't touch us. I don't need to tell you that what we're trying, no one has ever done before. But no one had ever smuggled out an entire six-foot chocolate lava cake meant for the ending feast, out of the kitchens, up and down the stairs, and through the door of the dungeons, had they?" Laughter reigned at that, Vince perking up at the clear reference to him, even though that *had* happened to be the doorstep that had let Dementors into the dungeons after him. "We've got a Beater who sees the unprecedented, and thinks, *Why not, I'm hungry!* He saw that cake, he wanted it, and did he give up like a fucking coward?"

"No!"

"That word impossible? That won't touch us! And maybe people will laugh at us. But do you know who had the most loathsome worm ever to wear the color pink slime her way over to his desk and demand he do charms he couldn't do? Our other Beater! And did he manage to do the charms?"

"No!"

"But did he cringe and scrape for her? Did he give up like a fucking coward?"

"No!"

"That mockery, that won't touch us! And yeah, they may underestimate us. But do you know who's been underestimated her whole life? Our Chaser!" Draco said, with his eyes on Pansy to be sure she knew who he meant. "Do you know who's the only person in the entire school to ever successfully curse *me* and get away with it? Our Chaser! And when she'd cast the Conjunctivitis curse on me at my own Christmas gala, did she apologize like a fucking coward?

"No!"

"That's right! She ran away and abandoned me in the dark, like a proper Slytherin! That doubt, that won't touch us! And so what if the rest of Slytherin wants us to lose? Do you know whose own *sister* wants us to lose? Our Chaser!" Astoria smiled ruefully. "And when her jealous sister was that petty to her, did our Chaser give up her spot to her sister like a fucking coward?"

"No!"

"That's right! That jealousy, that won't touch us! And maybe we're a motley crew. Maybe we don't look like much to everyone else. But do you know who didn't use to look like much? Our Chaser!" He nudged Theo, who looked less enthusiastic about his panegyric than the others. "You know who used to be a shy, bookish nerd who nobody noticed? Our Chaser!

You know who used to not stand out in a crowd? Our Chaser! But did he let that keep him an anonymous bookworm his whole life? Did he stay in the shadows, content to watch everyone else shine like a fucking coward?"

"No!"

"That's right! Being ignored, being overlooked, being cast aside, that doesn't touch us! Our Chaser went home, hit puberty, and came back to school hotter than Incendio! Our Chaser is a fucking smoke bomb now! They can't *handle* our Chaser! One look at those big blue eyes, and those Gryffindors are gonna be falling off their brooms swooning!"

"Salazar, Draco, stop," Theo groaned, though his grin had a secretly pleased cast to it.

"So!" Draco exclaimed. "What have we learned today? That they say Gryffindors are brave, but you know what? We're the brave ones. We face things they can't ever understand. From our families. Our friends. Ourselves. And we're not going to lose today, you know why? Nothing touches us! And we're not going to be *afraid* today, you know why?"

"Because we're not fucking cowards!" Vince exclaimed.

He looked guilty to have interrupted, but Draco smiled. "Exactly," he hissed. "Because we're not fucking cowards. Now let's go turn their skins inside out and wear them as pelts! Kingsnakes!"

"KINGSNAKES!"

They were energized as they went forward after that. Still, Draco couldn't help but further scan the stands for Hermione. He saw her with Ginny and Neville near the front of Gryffindor, with their red and gold everything to show their allegiances. At least they didn't have a sign the way Luna did, the Malfoy Invincible sign she was waving as its natural inheritor with great aplomb.

But they did have something the Slytherin side didn't: Sirius and Remus, sitting beside Professor McGonagall near the front chattering genially. They hadn't changed into Gryffindor colors, their robes still plain black, but where they were sitting still told a story. It must be a measure of how much the older Slytherins hated their own team, that they were dedicating so much energy to catcalling and hissing at the Kingsnakes, rather than dedicating even some of that energy towards the spectacle of the most famous man in the country over in enemy territory.

Sirius brightened when he saw Draco, waving down at him. Draco forced himself to wave back, while Harry, being Harry, didn't seem to have even noticed his godfather there. All he seemed to have eyes for was the Slytherin captain. When Draco stepped forward to face Johnson, Harry's eyes burned into him hot enough to sear through.

It was the first time he had played Harry without wind or rain in the red line, which he might have longed for as a factor of chaos to advantage him. Except these clear, temperate

conditions would be better for their formations and automations. He told himself he was not going to be the weak link for his team here...

"Captains, shake hands," Madam Hooch ordered, and Draco exchanged a far more civil handshake with Johnson than Flint ever had with Wood. Madam Hooch still eyed Draco warily, as if she even now wasn't quite sure what to make of him. "Mount your brooms..."

Then Madam Hooch blew her whistle, and Draco's first match as captain began.

Up they all went, and Millie immediately seized the Quaffle, calling out, "Battering ram!"

The Slytherins hurtled into their automation right away, with Vince and Greg ignoring the Bludgers and closing ranks around Pansy once Minnie threw her the Quaffle, all five Chasers and Beaters now hurtling in one mass towards the hoops with Ron barely in place in front of them. Fred and George had gotten to the Bludgers and were hitting them towards Pansy, but Vince and Greg were in place to hit them back, or in Greg's case, manfully take the hit for the lady.

"And it's Parkinson- Parkinson with the Quaffle- or no, is it Nott, I can't see- bloody hell, who even has the Quaffle, these great lugs are in the way- damn it!"

"Jordan!" McGonagall yelled.

Jordan's eternally biased commentary descended then to shocked obscenities as Astoria hurled the Quaffle right past Ron into the top hoop, with Ron's eyes still fixed on where Theo's hands had just been holding it. And it quickly became clear just how little Ron had needed the stirring chorus of 'Weasley is our King' to underperform in his first ever match.

"Bell reverse-passes to Spinnet and she's away for Gryffindor, heading towards the hoops like a crimson bullet- oh, she's been hit from behind by a Bludger from Crabbe, but she's got it off to Johnson- what a save by newcomer Bulstrode, with her foot no less! You wouldn't think she was so nimble by looking at her- and Bulstrode's thrown it massively up to the pitch to Nott, long ball play from the Slytherins, just hurl and hope..."

"Minotaur!" Millie yelled, and the three Chasers zoomed out wide, switching positions and interlocking each other's flights in a beautiful green-and-silver impression of the grid spell in the air.

Draco forced himself to stop anxiously watching the action on the pitch, and watch for the Snitch instead. He had the advantage this time of remembering where the Snitch would appear, close to the ground, after Ron had already been rather pulverized. He kept close to Harry anyway, realizing the game might go differently enough with Slytherin so different, and Harry looked back at him with annoyance before continuing to scan the ground for gold.

"Slytherin lead, ten-nil, but there's Fred Weasley- he's got Nott square in the face with that one, and Katie Bell's intercepted the Quaffle- oh, but what's this, Greengrass intercepts her throw to Johnson, and the Slytherins are off again- seems their Keeper is shouting all sorts of rot, Fred, George, you might wanna keep an eye and an ear on that-"

"JORDAN!"

"Sorry- oh, they're doing overlaps again- Nott with the give and go, but it's a fake-out, and the Gryffindors have been sent the wrong way! The Beaters seem to have abandoned the game to shoot Bludgers at each other- Parkinson and Greengrass with the give and go, this time it's not a fake- Ron's at the wrong hoop- Greengrass scores again! Twenty-nil to Slytherin! Bad luck, Ron!"

Try as Draco did to focus on following Harry and the search for the Snitch, he could not help but be aware of the excitement and confusion coming from the stands. The booing of Slytherin from the other houses had somewhat quieted, as onlookers seemed to be realizing Slytherin had no interest in the kind of thuggish fouling they had used to be known for. Instead, they were running their automations, which seemed to have caught Gryffindor completely off-guard, from a psychological as well as Quidditch standpoint. The few times that Gryffindor managed to intercept and put together an offense, Millie managed to pull off some daring saves, at one point slamming her face into a hoop in the process. She just spelled the bleeding to stop and carried on, ignoring offers to call a time-out.

"We've got them dead to rights!" she shrieked. "Grindelwald! Protego Diabolica!"

Draco abandoned his search for the Snitch to take up his position in the circle around Astoria once she got the Quaffle from Millie. It took a lot of coordination to fly around in a circle that went forward as a unit, and Draco had to keep half an eye out for the Snitch on the ground throughout, but it was working. They made a devilish green-silver blur, so fast it did almost seem to turn the blue of the curse it was named after, and no one seemed to know what to make of it, Fred and George not hitting the Bludgers in their amazement. They were all panting from flying like whirling dervishes once they reached the Gryffindor hoop, but it was worth it to see Ron's face.

Somewhere below, Draco spotted the glint of the Snitch, but he was moving too fast around in the motion of the circle-

"It's Nott with the Quaffle- no, it's Malfoy- too many ruddy blonds- no, now it's Parkinson- Slytherin scores! That's fifty-nil! Gryffindor, get it together!"

Thankfully, Harry's attention had been caught by their bizarre human protection spell, and he didn't even seemed to have noticed the Snitch had showed itself that one fleeting moment. When Draco looked back, it was gone. So much for using his memory to catch it. If he wanted to beat Harry to it, he would have to do it fair and square.

So the match stretched on, much to Gryffindor's detriment. Johnson called a timeout after Nott scored and made it 70-10, but nothing she said could change that they had prepared for a Slytherin with entirely different tactics than they were using. Clearly, they'd assumed Slytherin would be at its old shoving and taunting and child's play, not prearranged attacks from a professional Quidditch playbook. She couldn't snap her fingers and magically make them ready for that. Nor could she magically keep their petrified Keeper, his confidence already wrecked, from letting in almost every throw of the Quaffle that went remotely near the hoop.

"It's Johnson with the Quaffle, on a break towards the Slytherin hoops- yes, Gryffindor have intercepted and caught Slytherin on the break- the big Beaters can't catch up- but Bulstrode's come out of the hoops, and blocked the Quaffle with her big mug- and it's Nott picking up the Quaffle!"

"Chaos!" Millie shouted magnificently, and as one, the Slytherins abruptly lifted their brooms up high above the pitch, flying up twice the height of the hoops in a gleeful mass of green terror. Blaise had used to do that, just shouting chaos at the top of his lungs and soaring up when he was losing as a child. Sometimes it had surprised Pansy into dropping the Quaffle. Now, the Gryffindor man-marking system broke down completely, as the Chasers but not the Beaters shot up to follow. Even Harry went up, looking furious, and Ron let out an actual scream as the Slytherin Chasers all hurtled down in Seeker-like dives, right in front of the hoops.

"And the Chasers are diving from on high- Ron's staying in his hoops, good lad- oh, but what's this! Nott's thrown the Quaffle towards Parkinson- Ron's intercepted, he's blocked- oh, no! NO! It's bounced off Ron into the hoops! It's an own goal by Gryffindor! That's one *hundred* to ten now for Slytherin! I've never witnessed such atrocities in all my days! Stop, stop, this is a murder!"

"What the hell did you *do*, Draco?" Harry called over. Then he shot him a darker look as he pulled up to his side, so close their robes brushed. "Get off my tail! Look for the Snitch yourself!"

"Why should I, Harry," Draco yelled, and the thrill of calling Harry his first name for the first time in a Quidditch match was an unbelievably potent one. "When you're so good at it?"

Harry glared at him and then began to try and fly evasively to lose him, with Draco chasing him in his intricate patterns. This just added another element of chaos to proceedings, where the Slytherins thrived, sticking to their grids. "Serpensortia!" Millie screamed, and all three Chasers flew at Bell at once, intercepting her pass to Johnson, with Vince and Greg flying bravely right in the face of Fred and George to block them, even though the Gryffindors had the Bludgers.

"Oh, no! No, no, no! It's Slytherin with the Quaffle *again*, the possession stats are going to be so lopsided it's- and it's Nott with the Quaffle, Parkinson beside him- will Nott or Parkinson be the one to shoot- Merlin! It's Greengrass! It's like they've conjured her out of thin air! So pretty! So venomous! She was behind them the whole time! No one could see, she's so bloody small- Nott's tossed it back to her, and she's scored again! That's 120 to 20, Slytherin!"

After seeming to tire of his evasive maneuvers, Harry slowed, shoulders tensed magnificently under the flow of crimson over them. Draco could see Harry's gaze focus on something more intensely, and he swooped instinctively in its direction- but no, it was just the Gryffindor stands, where Sirius and Remus sat there watching, except then Sirius had leaped to his feet as Jordan called out about Bell taking a shot, one that Millie saved- Sirius threw his hands over his head in frustration, and flung himself back down to next to Remus, saying something in his ear.

Sirius and Remus now had Gryffindor scarves wrapped around both of their necks.

Draco forced his gaze back to Harry, and used all the speed in his Nimbus to catch up to him. When he stared over at Harry, falling back to his side, Harry looked so handsome with the slight breeze rising, sweeping his thick soft dark hair off his forehead, and Draco wanted to punch him in his perfect face. Sirius and Remus were here cheering for him, and he'd only just even noticed.

I'm going to beat him to the Snitch, Draco told himself, fighting back the awful lump in his throat. *I'm going to beat him to the Snitch, I don't care if I never have in a real match. I'm going to destroy him*- then Harry was diving, and Draco had dove with him before he even could think, towards the gold form of the Snitch, closer than he could have imagined, right by the Gryffindor stands, with Sirius and Remus there-

It abruptly swayed nearer to the grass, so Draco altered the angle of his dive to suicidal verticality, every tip Krum had ever given him going through his head at once, tight to his broom so much his teeth were crushing into the wood- he had his fingertips nearly on the Snitch-

Then he had fallen to the grass, along with Harry beside him. He raised his hand triumphantly to show the Snitch, only to find it was gone. Harry had gotten it. There were nail marks on the back of Harry's hand, shallow but very red jagged gouges like a dragon's claws, as Harry was the one to lift the Snitch in the air then, and a stand full of Gryffindors above them began to scream with such ecstasy, it hurt Draco's eardrums.

Harry's teammates piled down to express their joy, swerving around Draco like he wasn't there, while Jordan called, "And that's a wrap, ladies and gentleman! How the tide can turn when you have the superior Seeker! Harry Potter has caught the Snitch! It's 170 to 120! Gryffindor wins!"

"Draco," Theo was saying, pulling him to his feet unwillingly. Theo's face was red from exertion, hair all in disarray, with a weak look to the way he was holding himself like his muscles had all gone to jelly half an hour ago. "Draco, are you alright? Did you break anything in the fall? Draco?"

Angelina Johnson extricated herself from the pile, despite Fred's attempts to keep her there, and made her way over to them, trying to suppress her giddy grin. "Hey, Draco. Good game." She stuck out a hand to shake, and it took everything in Draco not to turn and walk away from her, the way Harry had walked away from him outside that courtroom.

He must have used up every bit of do-gooder righteousness left in him in that one small movement, forcing his hand to raise stiffly. He shook her hand, forced a nod, and led his team off the pitch to the catcalls and taunts of the sixth and seventh-year Slytherins, while the rest of the school cheered for Harry Potter.

The minute they were alone inside the Slytherin dressing room, Draco had his wand out. He'd thought about pulling it out and casting Cauterizo on Sirius's palm, he'd been that angry. He'd

thought about casting Legilimens on Potter and ripping every worst secret from his mind and leaving him sobbing on his knees in front of his team. But all he did was snarl out "Ventus!" The benches all blew back against the wall. "Confringo!" he screamed, and the blast decimated the wood of the benches entirely, blasting the lockers open and slamming back.

"Draco," Millie said tiredly, "As your teammate, I feel the obligation to inform you, if you're trying to curse us, you're casting in the wrong direction."

"I'm not!" Draco screamed. "I just- I'm so angry, I can't, Millie, I *can't*-" Draco felt tears pricking at his eyelids, but he wasn't going to cry. What had he told them all? That they were untouchable?

He'd been right. *They* had been untouchable up there. They'd been incredible. Better than he could have dreamed. Yet they'd lost, because Draco had been the weak link, after he'd been the one to force them to put themselves on the line like this. They'd lost, because in a fair fight, it seemed like he could never, ever beat Harry Potter to the Snitch...

"It's okay," Millie said cautiously. "We're not mad at you for not- Grindelwald, calm down-"

"Kingsnakes?" Greg said weakly, holding his hand out for them to put together and slap. Draco let out a wordless scream of frustration and cast Finestra maxima, hard enough to not just shatter every window in the room, but send the shards of glass ripping out through the emerald velvet curtains and towards them all.

"Ninguifors!" he yelled, turning the glass to ice. When Theo coaxed all of the Slytherins out but him and Draco, they all had snowflakes in their hair.

Draco cast Ventus again and again and didn't feel even an iota better. Theo stood by the door left ajar, as if reserving the chance to flee at a moment's notice, but still wanting to save Draco from being seen like this. That was Theo in a nutshell- one foot in the door, one foot out, compelled by the destruction around Draco but always with an exit strategy at hand.

Draco wanted to cast the Cruciatus curse on him. He could practically feel in his fingers how good it would feel, even if this timeline's Theo had never done a damn thing to him but be kind and play for his Quidditch team. Not that Theo would really have deserved it in the blue loop either...

That awful impulse made Draco pocket his wand. He took his hand off the hilt of it in his pocket, however comforting it felt to stroke it. He'd already made more than enough of a mess, literally as well as figuratively. The Slytherin dressing room looked like it had been hit by a very invernal apocalypse. The temperature felt ten degrees colder inside, even though there had been so much hot wind. Everything was a wrecked mess of green robes in tatters and blasted snakewood, fragments and splinters all around Draco where he stood in a center whose last feet had him untouched, nothing but the usual immaculate floor.

Draco sank into that untouched eye and sat down hard, putting his head in his hands. He could feel his feet push against a snow-covered beam that had fallen from the ceiling, and kicked at it without energy. Theo kicked it aside for him, spelled the area beside him dry, and then sat with him. The snowflakes were melting in his hair.

"Draco," Theo said, and reached out towards him tentatively. When Draco didn't put away, he pulled the S clasp out of Draco's hair that had held it so well in place, pushed it into Draco's pocket, and began to run his fingers through Draco's sweaty hair, smoothing it softly back from his forehead.

Draco sighed and leaned instinctively into the touch, nothing electric in these fingertips on the scalp, but touch itself was a comfort. Theo scooted closer, stroking Draco's hair with one hand cupping his cheek. Draco had managed not to cry, but whatever his face did have on it was making those dark blue eyes look at him with- with-

"DON'T PITY ME!" Draco yelled, jerking back from him and right into a pile of icy wood. He brushed it off of his sweat and now snow-soaked robes furiously, hands giving a massive tremble in pure anger. "Don't, Theo! Don't! Don't feel *sorry* for me! Do you have any idea how easily I could ruin you? How easily I could tear you *apart*?"

Theo smiled ruefully at that, taking Draco's hand to pull him close again, until Draco's weight was leaned against his thigh, a grounding warmth in the cold Draco had inflicted upon them. "After that display, Grindelwald, you don't really need to remind me."

He kept smiling, and kept hold of Draco's hand. Draco could feel the sweetness of that touch, as well as the unwitting fascination behind it. Theo had never *wanted* to like Draco half as much as he did. And Draco... Draco had just wanted someone to fuck who'd keep it secret, and Theo had been familiar. Theo was safe...

"Listen," Theo said, "You know you did an amazing job, didn't you? As captain-"

"But not as Seeker," Draco snapped, pulling his hand back. "You're shit at being comforting, aren't you, Theo?" But he submitted to Theo stroking his hair again, fingertips infinitely gentle across his forehead before they slid through the top of Draco's hair. Theo had used to stroke Draco's hair like this after they fucked, at least sometimes, though he'd never let Draco lie in his lap for it like he'd always wanted to.

It was surreal, having this whole romantic history with a person who knew none of it- knowing how they tasted, when they didn't even know you had tasted them.

The stroking felt different now, because of course, Draco's hair had been much shorter then. He wouldn't have wanted to look like Severus then, even if he could-

"Severus!" Draco's voice broke. "Severus, I let him down- all of you, and *Severus*- he put me in charge, he trusted me, he gave me this chance, and I'm the reason that-"

"We can still win the cup," Theo said logically. "That's what's important, you know. It's only a fifty-point deficit. If we win our other two games by large enough margins, we could win it the way Gryffindor did in third year, even if they win *all* their matches..."

"Shut up," Draco muttered, and with a groan, he grabbed Theo by the neck and buried his face in his shoulder. It was a familiar scent, although never what Amortentia had smelled like, except the scent of Quidditch was nice. But the desire that had used to cut through his

gut when touching Theo was gone, as cold as the gleaming shattered glass turning to ice crystals in the wood-hazed air.

He could have tried to seduce Theo, beautiful cold Theo, but what would be the point? It didn't feel like there was a point in anything, let alone in replicating old mistakes, just to distract himself from the fact that he felt like a product already far, far past its expiration date.

"You can cry if you want, Draco," Theo said, and Draco peeled his face off to glare at him mightily.

"I know. I can do as I like. I can curse you if I want, too, but thankfully for you, I'm not inclined right now to do that either," he hissed. "Now shut up and hug me, you annoying-"

"Draco?" Harry's voice came from outside, and then the ajar door was pushed open.

Draco pulled back from Theo, but not either slowly or quickly enough to stop it from looking a guilty kind of withdrawal. "Draco?" Harry said again. "Are you alright?"

"I could ask you the same thing, Potter," Draco spat. "Shouldn't you be off celebrating your victory? With all your friends? Your fans? The Weasleys? Professor Lupin? Your *godfather*? If you're here to tell me off for humiliating Ron-"

"I just wanted to make sure you were alright," Harry said, looking guilty.

"Theo's here," Draco snapped, getting up more slowly. "And he's my teammate. We lost, it was my fault, he's comforting me. Not NEWT-level Arithmancy, Potter-"

"Oh, Potter doesn't take Arithmancy," Theo said, "He doesn't have a head for numbers," and Draco laughed without meaning to.

Harry's face tightened. "Hello, Nott. You played well today." He offered a handshake that Theo ignored.

There was more spite for Harry than Draco would have believed on Theo's face. "I'm surprised you even know my name, Harry Potter. You've barely spoken to me in five years. But I suppose you know my father."

"Yeah," Harry said levelly, his attempt at civility starting to be chipped away. "Met him in a graveyard, you might have heard."

"Yes," Theo said with ice in his voice. "I've heard. And I've heard who else was there," he said, glancing at Draco.

"You wouldn't tell on him, though," Harry said with a newly miserable sort of confidence. "Don't try to scare me. I know about the two of you. I've seen the rings Draco's making the two of you, the ones he doesn't want anyone to know about."

Draco froze, and Theo looked puzzled. "What rings? What is he talking about?"

"Matching rings," Harry said. "Made of raw black diamond. He's using all the old jewelry from cleaning out the Black house for transfiguration. He's been working on it all the time, and normally he'll talk about his transfiguration, but this, he always lies about or hides out of view-"

"Draco has never given me anything transfigured," Theo said defensively. "There's no manner of inversion or deviance between us, none at all, so don't imply such things-"

"Who *are* the matching rings for, then?"

"I- I can't tell you," Draco said nervously, "I'm sorry," and Harry had to take a deep breath, he looked like that stung so much.

"Right. Like you can't tell me what you saw in the Mirror of Erised-"

"The what?" said Theo, and Harry ignored him.

"What your Boggart was- what memory you use for your Patronus- why you needed those blood magic books- why you don't think you're good enough- how you knew about the diary in second year, who taught you Occlumency, Draco, you never tell me a thing! And you never told me about you and Nott! But now I've seen! You don't have to tell me. I *know*-"

"I wouldn't think," Theo said coldly, in contrast to Harry's fading composure, "That you know much of anything, Potter. Nor would I think you much use, save as a blood donor, so unless you're planning to offer some, I suggest you leave your betters alone-"

"Are you gloating about that?" Harry asked in disbelief. "What Voldemort did to me? Are you proud that your father is, what, a glorified lackey, for that murderous madman-"

"At least I have a father," Theo said with absolute ice in his voice, drawing himself up to his full height with pristine composure. "You might want to look towards your own situation, you half-blood mutt, before you start going on about other people's. Whatever my father is, he's alive. Can't say the same for yours. Yours was too weak to survive, just like-"

"Theo, don't," Draco said frantically, trying to get between them, but it was Theo now to just shove him aside and square up to Harry.

"Just like your Mudblood mother-"

Harry drew his fist back and slugged Theo in the nose with all his might. Theo went crashing back into the snow and splinters. Then he sprang on Harry, tackling him to the ground, and they were fighting, not with wands but fists. Draco stepped forward, thinking to try and pull them apart, but one of Theo's flailing fists nearly caught him. Theo and Harry kept grappling with each other, before Harry rolled on top and drove his fist right into Theo's face again. Draco could hear something crack, and see a stream of blood pour down, before Theo screamed and bucked Harry off him, going right after him like a beast smelling blood even if it was his own-

"Stop it!" Draco yelled, and they ignored him, trying their best by all appearances to beat each other's skulls in. Draco remembered Harry springing on him like this in their duel in first year. Draco had not put up nearly so much of a fight. It seemed Harry was getting the best of it, but it was hard to tell, with both of them bloody. There was no knowing whose blood was whose-

Then the door opened again, with Sirius and Remus standing there in Gryffindor colors. It took a moment for them to understand what was happening, and then with a wordless wave of Sirius's wand, the two boys were thrown to opposite sides of the wrecked dressing room. "ENOUGH!" Remus bellowed, brandishing his wand as well. Harry made only one attempt to lunge at Theo before Sirius held him back. Remus went over to do the same with Theo, though there was less need, with Theo holding his broken nose and splitting out blood.

"I should call your Heads of House for this," Remus said chillingly, "But then Umbridge would likely hear of it, and who knows what *she* might do? What is going on here?"

"He attacked me," Theo snapped, "The papers are right, he really is psychotic-"

"He called my mother a Mudblood!" Harry yelled, and Sirius and Remus's sympathies switched so quickly, it was a miracle no one fell over from the whiplash in the air.

"They're the Potters' childhood friends," Draco observed dryly to Theo. "You kind of ended up with the wrong crowd for that."

"I didn't *mean* it!" Theo protested. "I was trying to say what I thought would hurt him the most! He started it! Draco and I were just talking about the game, and he showed up-"

"And wrecked your dressing room?" Remus sighed, pocketing his wand and pinching the bridge of his nose.

"No, that was me," Draco said in a small voice, which thankfully no one seemed to hear.

"I can fix your nose, young man," Remus said, and Theo nodded respectfully. Draco remembered that Remus had been a very respected Defense professor for a year, as Remus stepped forward and performed Episkey for Theo's nose, and then for Harry's busted lip. "Mr. Nott, what could possibly justify using that kind of language?"

"He said I was *gay*!" Theo argued, wiping at the blood on his face. "Or- implied, but- *he's* the one who took it to that level, not me!"

"Why would he-" Remus began, and then looked at Draco and just sighed. "Of course. That's what this is about." He gave Draco that all-knowing look of his. For once, instead of being calming, it just made Draco loathe him.

"What do you mean?" Sirius asked blankly.

"What do *you* know?" Draco yelled at Remus, rage surging up unexpectedly. "Don't act like you know a thing about Slytherins *or* about me! Don't stop rooting against me *now*-"

"We were here to support both of you-"

"You sat with Gryffindor! And wore their scarves!"

"We knew people there!" Sirius protested. "Minerva invited us to sit with-"

"You know *Luna*!" Draco yelled. "But whatever! What should I have expected? Never mind that *I'm* the one who fought for you! I'm the one who believed in you when no one else did! When Harry didn't- whatever! Just go on supporting your victorious Gryffindor son like you always do-"

"Always?" Harry echoed disbelievingly. "Are you kidding me? They're always favoring *you*- you're the one who lives with them- you're the one who's like their son, *I'm* the one left out in the cold-"

"Left out in the- are you serious, Potter? They'd have had you if-"

"So instead you just get everything *I* could have had, and I have to go back to the Dursleys, and they-"

"You think I don't know that I'm still the outsider? Make that clearer, why don't you-"

"I'm the outsider and you know it! But no, you just have to have them all to yourself! And the one time they actually cheer for me, you give them this much backlash?"

"What is with you two?" Sirius despaired, as *Draco* was the one Remus had to rush and pull back from lunging at Harry now.

"What are you, on Nott's side?" Harry growled. "How can you let someone like that *touch* you? Let alone let him- let him-"

"Bloody hell," Sirius groaned, keeping his wand out. "Remus, what should we-"

"I'm not with Theo, you psychotic stalker!" Draco shrieked. "You're the one everyone wants, not me! You caught the Snitch! You always do! You always win, you always win at everything-"

"Are you kidding me? Perfect Draco Malfoy with his perfect dueling and perfect tactics and perfect hair and perfect eyes- you get everything and I get nothing, you even get *my godfather*-"

"You are such a stupid prick!" Draco screamed, lunging at him again.

"He's my godfather, not yours!" Harry screamed back, trying to lunge for him too before Sirius held him back. "You've got one already! Just because yours is ugly and nasty and tried to have you *killed*-"

Draco drew his wand and Sirius threw his body between them. "Draco! Put that away!"

"Forget about me helping you with Occlumency!" Draco screamed, straining around Sirius to make sure Harry could see how uncompromising the anger on his face had become. "And if I'm such a bastard trying to take your bloody *father figure* away from you that you need so

bad, then give me back the mirror! You ungrateful Gryffindors, *always*! Fine! I hate you! All of you!" Theo shifted uncomfortably. "YOU INCLUDED!" Draco snarled, and Theo drew back in shock.

"I'm leaving," Draco said finally, staring each of them in the eye, daring them to stop him. "Theo, be a bigot all you want, I'm not listening to it anymore! Black, Lupin, *Potter*- I hope you three are very happy with your adorable little fake family! Just don't expect me to-"

"You're just bitter I beat you to the Snitch again-"

"LANGLOCK!" Draco screamed, and hit Harry square in the face with it. He stormed away, back to the castle, before anyone could tell him to take the curse away.

It was a damn shame that Severus had to be so good at his job. Instead of the satisfaction of Harry spending days if not weeks on mute, like a Muggle television with the sound switched off, Draco was summoned to Severus's office the next day and read the riot act.

Apparently Severus had not appreciated having his chambers invaded by two of his old schoolboy nemeses the past night, with a Langlocked Harry in tow, whom they demanded Severus fix. Severus had, with the antidote potion he now seemed to keep on hand solely for Draco-related Langlock occurrences. But Severus clearly considered it a singularly demeaning act to help them. And blamed Draco for subjecting him to it.

"I didn't realize he could just get the antidote from your stores," Draco sulked, "Or I would have cast the counter-curse then. I thought he'd have to wait for you to brew it new, and you'd be slow on purpose, and he'd spend weeks not able to talk."

"What *happened* with you and the Potter boy?" Severus asked, irritation turning to alarm.

"Only," Draco said, taking a deep breath, "That I hate him and I wish I had never helped him with anything and I want him to go off and DIE IN A HOLE!"

Severus gave Draco one of the fondest stares he had ever directed at him, like this was sweet music to his ears. "Oh, if only," he sighed blissfully. "If only this could last."

Broken Baubles

Chapter Notes

Playlist

In wake of the loss to Gryffindor, Draco reconciled quickly with Theo and his other teammates. Theo apologized for using the word Mudblood, and Draco apologized for blowing up at him along with the Gryffindors in the fight. And wrecking their dressing room. And costing them the match.

Okay, maybe Draco had more to apologize for, but they forgave him, and agreed to Blaise's suggestion to practicing four times a week, using Sunday nights as well. If anything, the others' determination seemed to have been *increased* by their loss.

As for Sirius and Remus, Draco sent a long letter, and received a letter back from both of them, which was an apology as well. It was an apology for seeming to support Harry at Quidditch and not him from Sirius, and an acknowledgment of the validity of Draco's feelings with deep regret from Remus. Both of their handwriting had its place in the rambling letter, which ended in reassurances that Draco was wrong if he thought that they took him for granted and didn't care about him, and that they would try and prove it to him going forward. Draco could tell himself the damage he'd done to those relationships had healed. He tried to forgive them back. But it didn't seem he could make himself forgive what had really angered him at all of them in the first place.

Still, it was easier than with Harry. Draco found no inclination in himself to even try to forgive. It didn't help that Draco felt he would rather face a Boggart than apologize. From what Neville said, Harry felt the same way about facing Draco at all. He was just lucky Draco hadn't cursed him far worse, and maybe he knew it.

So their friend group split in two with predictable results. Draco got Luna and Hermione, and Harry got Ron and Neville, in an incredibly uneven distribution of brainpower. Draco got the Rat Thieves, Harry got the blunderbusses, and all was right with the world. Draco was happy not having to tutor Occlumency, happy not having the blunderbusses at what was now the official Rat Thieves library table, and happy to not be in DA and only hear about it from Hermione and Luna.

Ron, though, was far from happy. He waylaid Draco one brisk mid-November afternoon, on his way back from Hagrid's hut. Hagrid's return had prompted a copious series of visits there from both groups, and it was sometimes difficult to coordinate against overlap. But everyone knew Draco had his new independent study lessons with Hagrid, preparing to take the OWL without Hagrid's class. So everyone knew he'd be outside with Hagrid on a Sunday afternoon, and yet Ron showed up anyway.

They'd snuck a few notes and conversations in already, but this was the first time Ron managed to corner Draco long enough to interrogate him. He seemed to bear none of the grudge Draco would have expected from the match, instead seeming inclined to blame his own nerves for getting the best of him. Draco wished they were still the kind of friends where Draco could advise him on that, if Quidditch rivalries wouldn't have been in the way anyway.

"I don't even understand what you and Harry fought about," was Ron's chief complaint. "He said you were fighting with Sirius and Remus too, *and* Theodore Nott, all of you. Every time I try and have him explain it to me, it makes less sense. Neville doesn't get it either. He misses Luna."

"Yeah, I know," Draco sighed. "I know you miss the girls. I'm sorry I took them from you-"

"We miss you too, Draco," Ron complained, falling in step with Draco as they reached the Entrance Hall and Draco headed towards the dungeons. "It's kind of boring without you around, you know? We laugh so much less."

Draco tried not to show how gratified he was by that sentiment. "I'd rather you and Neville were hanging around with us too," he said loftily.

"You all even have your own cool group name to leave us out," Ron sulked, but followed Draco right into Severus's chambers. "What? Where else can we be sure Harry would never show up? I mean, you three call yourselves what, the Rat Thieves? From third year?"

"Yeah," Draco said, "From when we were trying to help Uncle Sirius."

Ron snorted at him, following him into Severus's chambers with an unhappy sigh. "You mean when you three wouldn't tell us anything and kept it all from me and Harry, for, like, no reason, even when we *would* have helped you? Okay, maybe I get why Harry says you try and leave him out of things when it comes to his godfather."

"This is just his bloody *daddy issues* acting up!" Draco yelled. "Nothing to do with *me*!"

"He really does think you're sweet on Theo Nott. You aren't, are you?"

"What would it matter if I was?"

"Don't play dumb."

"Don't *be* dumb!"

"*You* don't be dumb!"

"No, *you* don't be dumb-"

"As scintillating as this... discussion may be," a voice intoned from the other room, deep and bored, "I must request you have it *elsewhere*."

"I'm staying," Draco declared when Ron tried to pull him out. "And Potter can apologize to me if he wants, but I'm not apologizing to him. Ever. Tell him I said that if you want-"

"Hermione's worried that without those lessons, Harry's mind will be too vulnerable-"

"Then he can come crawling back, apologize to me, and beg me to teach him what his little pea brain is probably too miniscule for anyway- perhaps as miniscule as *other* parts of his anatomy- and please, tell him I said *that* as well-"

With that, Severus marched out and ejected his Gryffindor visitor, which ended the first diplomatic mission of one Ronald Weasley. Ron made further attempts once or twice a week, but they never tended to get much further than the first.

Draco had so much time, with genuinely only studying and Quidditch practices to occupy him, and without even a Quidditch match impending again very soon. He finished the rings for Sirius and Remus by the end of the month, though he wasn't sure if Sirius would even still want them from him. They hadn't spoken about it since the request. Sometimes, he worried, Sirius must have changed his mind, or not have been as serious about it as he sounded, and Draco had expended all those countless hours of research and labor for nothing.

But it was done before December, and so the start of winter was a rather light one indeed when it came to work, given how much of his OWL prep save Arithmancy and Ancient Runes he was just repeating from the blue loop. His mind didn't stay very occupied, save the rare times he and Hermione and Luna got to have fun together when the girls weren't too busy with studying, DA, or prefect duties in Hermione's case. It snowed like mad outside, limiting the amount of time Draco wanted to wander around other than Quidditch practice. Hagrid had his hands full with Umbridge breathing down his neck, so Draco limited his visits there to going with the girls, much as he sometimes found himself wishing he could head out after another shitty day of classes for a mug of hot cider and a visiting cuddle with Imoogi. Luna would hug Imoogi each time they visited, but Draco was too proud to do it in front of them.

Hermione told them she was traveling, going skiing with her parents over the holidays. This was something they had touched upon in their Muggle Studies OWL review, which Draco had thought looked rather entertaining, if dangerous. When she tried to invite him along, he got excited at first, especially when she said Luna had already agreed to come with them. But as much as she claimed her parents missed him, he could see the invitation was as much out of pity as anything. Hermione could see how down he'd been despite his best efforts, since he'd lost to Gryffindor and fallen out with Harry, and by extension the blunderbusses.

"I'm not just letting him have his perfect family Christmas with Sirius and Remus so they can all pretend the inconvenient Slytherin doesn't exist, now that he's served his purpose," he snapped. He regretted it, after Hermione spent the next several days trying to be his Mind Healer and make him talk about his feelings.

Apparently, while both Draco and Harry were going back by train to London for the holidays- what a lovely trip together that should be- Sirius and Remus intended to coordinate their Christmas celebrations with the Weasleys', and have Christmas dinner at the Burrow. This made Draco happy to the extent that he got to see Ron over Christmas, while irking him once he realized it was transparently an effort to ensure Harry got to spend time with both of

his surrogate families. Because of course whatever Harry said, he was always the priority. At least hopefully Charlie would be around. Draco was already thinking up the best ways to use him to make Harry die of jealousy.

If that even applied anymore. He could imagine shooting innuendos at Charlie across Mrs. Weasley's well-appointed holiday table and not getting so much as a blink from Harry now. He'd probably hit it off with Ginny by now in the DA meetings that Draco wasn't attending, and Draco wouldn't arouse anything in him but a vague sense of jealousy, distaste, and contempt anymore.

Except the next time Draco spent any prolonged period in the same room as Harry, it seemed that he very much still had Harry's attention. Dobby had been trying to get Draco to go back to DA, though he'd quickly realized speeches about the generosity and wondrousness of Harry Potter weren't well-calculated to get Draco on side. Instead, Dobby needled him one evening soon before the last DA meeting of the semester, when Draco made the mistake of stopping by in the kitchens for extra hot cocoa after Slytherin practice and got a guilt trip along with the extra marshmallows.

"Dobby worked very hard on the Christmas decorations for Dumbledore's Army," Dobby complained, misty-eyed. "Dobby poured his heart and soul into these decorations! And Draco Malfoy is not going to see them even once, because Draco Malfoy is fighting with Harry Potter? But Draco Malfoy is supposed to be friends with Dobby! Does Draco Malfoy not *care* about Dobby?"

Bloody hell, having Wooky and Nissy as friends was making Dobby far too canny for his own good. "Of course I do, Dobby," Draco said uncomfortably, weighed down still with the oppressive sense of having behaved badly, towards not just Dobby but all the elves, after their little elf trio had been the ones to exert their magic after the Gryffindor-Slytherin match. Their elf magic had restored everything in the Slytherin dressing room to good as new, through a great effort on their part, that had left all three visibly drawn and tired for days. If anyone owed Dobby, it was Draco. "I just... Harry and I, it's..."

"Dobby is not asking for Harry Potter's sake," Dobby said firmly, which had to be the closest to an outright lie that Dobby had ever told him. They both knew that Dobby was just trying to get him and Harry to make up. Dobby knew he knew, but the stubborn Gryffindor elf had to have his way, by more Slytherin-like means if necessary. "Dobby is asking for Dobby."

"Okay, fine, fine, if it means that much to you, I'll go to the last DA meeting this semester, alright?" Draco groused.

"It *is* the last chance for Draco Malfoy to see the decorations," Dobby said brightly. "Dobby knows that Draco Malfoy will like them very much."

The minute Draco stepped foot in that room, he knew he'd been had. There was no possible way Dobby had thought someone on the current terms he was with Harry would like these.

For a split second, he'd thought the dozens of hanging golden baubles were nice, if rather tacky, and hardly anything on a scale to impress *Draco*. And Dobby, who'd seen the set-up for the Heart of Winter gala for so many years, had to know that.

But the tackiness was hardly the main problem. Mainly, it was the fact that every one of those baubles had a picture of Harry's face on them, like the worst kind of spoiled potion-fueled Yule nightmare, with the words HAVE A VERY HARRY CHRISTMAS! written below every face.

Oh, Draco *was* going to have a Very Harry Christmas. That was what he was afraid of.

The boy himself was there in the far corner, inspecting one of them with the horror transparent on his face. He had on a cranberry-red jumper and Muggle jeans, with a face far less adorable than the cartoonish Harry on the bulbs, and far more impossible to look away from: just because Draco didn't spend every Monday staring into Harry's eyes anymore, it didn't mean he didn't *want* to. "Oh, hello," Harry said, and then jumped in shock when he looked up and saw Draco was the first arrival. "Draco! Oh, God- oh my *God*- what are you *doing* here?"

"I *am* still technically a member of your personal Potter cult, aren't I?" Draco drawled. He made no move to take a step closer to Harry, even if it meant shouting at each other across the Room of Requirement. "And I was told I simply *had* to see the decorations."

"This was all Dobby!" Harry yelped. "It's not a *cult*- and I didn't want these decorations with *me* on them-" He began to hurriedly pull them down, only for Draco to snap at him.

"Dobby made those for you, you ungrateful prick! What are you doing taking them down?" "Okay, fine," Harry said, and left them alone. "But I never would have asked for this, Draco, you have to believe me-"

Draco did, but he wasn't inclined to do anything that seemed conciliatory before Harry was on his knees before him begging for forgiveness. "Whatever you say, Harry," he said coolly, and turned on his heel, thinking he could describe the decorations to Dobby now, and that would have to be enough to satisfy him-

"Cousin!" Luna exclaimed brightly, coming up from behind him to give him a hug. "Oh, isn't it marvelous! Do you think we're going to have a Very Harry Christmas?"

"*You* won't," Draco muttered. "*You'll* be spared of that calamity. You get to go off skiing with Hermione and her awesome parents. Tell me why I didn't just agree to go with you two again?"

"Because letting Harry have Christmas alone with Sirius and Remus would be like admitting he's won?" Luna whispered, and Draco smiled at least at that. Someone who understood him.

"Exactly!"

"Oh, Draco, *do* say you'll partner with me today," Luna said, linking her arm with his and dragging him over to the board at the back where newspaper clippings had been

accumulating. They had to avoid the sprigs of white-berried mistletoe that Dobby had hung all about, but they managed, with Luna still glued onto his arm the whole time. There went leaving before the meeting started.

It didn't take long for the meeting to show just how far everyone had come in Draco's absence, Neville most of all. As they spent the session just reviewing past ones, watching Neville navigate Impedimenta was a revelation. Draco kept going over to compliment him on it, until Neville was blushing ear to ear in happiness. He started regretting coming to the meeting when they started up on Stunning spells, and Luna's proved a real whopper. For his part, he wanted to stun Luna so little, he found the spells not even working half the time.

Luna got bored with his subpar stunning and said she wanted to see him practice shielding, instead. Her excited chattering about the time he had saved her from twenty Stunning spells soon attracted a large crowd, while Harry was off in the corner trying to convince Fred and George that they shouldn't be aiming their Stunning spells at Terry Boot's back instead of each other. Soon, Luna had enough of an audience that she had to start again.

Draco shook his head inwardly, remembering how shy Luna had used to be, and felt a pang of warmth at the thought of how much she had blossomed. She was wearing his favorite of her earrings, the world-weary pink armadillos. He leaned over and scratched one affectionately, enjoying the exasperated glance they exchanged under Luna's excited nose. He would miss watching Luna growing stronger like this, the thought flitted through his head, if he died soon.

"And so," Luna finished excitedly, "Harry pulled Ron and Hermione to the ground, but I had froze up! And all the twenty Ministry wizards, there was Ron's father and Cedric Diggory's and Mr. Crouch from the Triwizard Tournament, they all shot their stunners in a circle around us, and my cousin grabbed me and threw up his shield over us, and none of the spells touched us! And then he filled the entire clearing with red fog, and then he made a tornado that ripped up all the trees!"

This did not seem to be meeting an overly high level of belief, from the daughter of the editor of the Quibbler. "Okay, Luna," Cho Chang's annoying friend laughed, with enough of a lean on the first syllable, she must have meant to say *Looney* before changing her mind.

"That totally sounds like a real story," a Hufflepuff Draco didn't know laughed, and oh, *hell* no, Draco's cousin was not about to be publicly laughed at by *Hufflepuffs*-

"It happened!" Luna persisted. "Tell them, Draco!"

"It's true, it did," Hermione and Draco said at the same time, overlapping and drowning each other out. "Jinx," Draco said, and stuck his tongue out at her.

"Oh, come on," Ginny laughed, "*Twenty* wizards? Including our father, Ron? Are you sure it was really all Stupefy they were casting, and not just warning sparks?"

Something leaden set in Draco's stomach. "Oh, you don't believe my cousin? Try me! How many people are in this room today? Twenty-eight? I took on twenty adults, twenty-eight of you children won't be a problem for me. Go ahead, let's try it!"

"Draco," Ron said slowly, "Are you *suggesting* that we all stand around you in a circle and curse you?"

"That's exactly what I'm suggesting," Draco snapped, and shook off Hermione's hand on his arm. "Come on, Potter, Weasleys, you too. I'll show you what a proper shield looks like. You signed up for this club to learn about Defense, right? Don't you all want to see something cool before you go home for the holidays?"

Harry had come back over, and looked indescribably annoyed at the situation. "This *is* a Defense club, Draco. Not a personal show-off session, or your time to try and get yourself killed."

"I think he can't hold it," Fred said immediately. "Who wants to bet? Come on, any takers, any takers?" No one seemed willing to bet that Draco *could* hold it.

"Give me a chance," Draco pleaded. "If you're going to say I can't do it, at least give me the chance to prove I can." And he was suddenly very much not confident in his own ability to produce. Let alone that there were this many more wizards here, there wasn't the spontaneous circumstances of instinctually protecting Luna, not night but conditions of perfect visibility, and he was one target instead of one of five. That group before hadn't had Harry Potter and all that raw magical power as one of the casters.

"Oh, come on, Harry, it's not going to kill him," said George.

"What's a little grievous bodily injury between friends?" Fred added chipperly.

"Okay, fine," Harry scowled, and went over to stand in the forming circle, wand out. It sent another pinprick of self-doubt through Draco. He was already regretting sticking his neck out, nasty looks towards Luna or not. But he couldn't back down now without looking like a coward. "This isn't going to work, Draco, even for you. Twenty-eight stunners-"

"Twenty-seven," Luna said brightly. "Someone has to count down, I can."

"Okay, then," Hermione said crisply. "Fred, George, I'll take that bet. How much?"

"Twenty-seven Galleons, for twenty-seven people?" George said with a predatory grin.

"Sure," Hermione said, "And if I win, I'll expect twenty-seven from each of you."

"No problem," Fred said, with a grin like the cat that caught the canary.

"Oh, just twenty-seven, that's no problem, then," Ron said queasily. "Um, Draco, you know you don't actually have to go through with..."

"None of you lot," Draco said haughtily, "Have the least idea of what I'm capable of, do you? Perhaps it's time you learned."

"You know," he heard Ron say to Neville, "Sometimes I wonder why the Slytherins in his year call him Grindelwald these days. And sometimes I, like, *don't*, you know?"

"Alright!" Luna said excitedly. "Everyone ready? Draco? Wands up!"

Draco saw a sea of wands pointed at him from essentially point-blank range. He gripped the talon wand in his hand, tight enough it was like he was trying to meld it into his skin. He envisioned the dam behind which the inky, murky pool of smoke that was his magic lived, envisioned letting it all out, no restraints whatsoever, as if he was trying to turn the Earth on its axis and it would never be a matter of anything but not *enough* power. He even threw in a prayer to the demon goddess Hecate, feeling at the moonstone dagger in his other pocket before pulling his right hand out. The talon wand seemed to purr at the current he was letting flow through, though it seemed readier to lash out than protect.

"Three... two... one... go!"

"STUPEFY!" shouted twenty-seven voices: every member of Dumbledore's Army but Draco and Luna, including the Boy Who Lived, four Weasleys, and the brightest witch *or* wizard of their generation.

"PROTEGO HORRIBILIS!" Draco screamed, and the shield that came up around him was clear at first, and shimmering. Then the stunners hit it, turning the transparent film in the air a lurid red- and Draco's magic swelled up like a pit of escaping shadows, turning the shield black, a second before Draco's hand *was* the talon wand, palm going absolutely numb, no more feeling in it than the wood as the impact of the Stunning spells turned back outwards, and sent a shockwave through the room that shook it to the rafters. There were the cries of students thrown back all over the room, and then a secondary wave of cries as the baubles began to fall down on them like a gilded hailstorm. Harry Potter's face flew down and cracked all around the faithful members of his army.

Draco found he was breathing hard, but when he opened his eyes and looked around himself, he wasn't tired or drained the way he expected, the way he'd been after he did this the last time at the Quidditch World Cup. He almost felt more energy, like the magical energy had turned physical and animated his frame, like he wanted more attacks coming at them so he could feed off them as fuel. He felt perfect, except for the small matter that he couldn't feel his right hand.

There was no sound for a long time after that, save people gasping for breath.

"Holy fucking shit," Fred breathed, and then a rather windswept-looking Hermione had sprung up from the pile of golden baubles that had fallen on her, and ran over to him.

"FRANKENSTEIN!" she shrieked at the top of her lungs, and Draco surreptitiously stuck out his left hand, and peeled the talon wand from his limp right hand to push into his pocket. Then he let her hug him, returning it one-armed. "Oh, I knew you could do it! I knew, I knew!"

"This seems a case of insider trading to me," Fred complained, "Or whatever it's called with gambling, you know what I mean," but they agreed to pay up to Hermione at a later date.

Luna ran over and hugged Draco too, while Neville clapped a bit, and Ron clasped him on the shoulder, ruing not having gotten in on that bet. Then there was an at-first scattered, then

heartfelt applause, as all the Dumbledore's Army members climbed to their feet and cheered for him.

Draco sat there happily accepting the congratulations that poured in as the DA members poured out. Clearly, he had managed to conclude things for the Potter cult on a dramatic note. *You're welcome,* he thought dazedly in Harry's direction, where the Chosen One was currently trying to escape the heartfelt goodbye embraces of the two Creeveys. "Careful, Harry," Draco called out, "Looks like the littler one's trying to trap you under the mistletoe-"

"Oh, *no*!" Neville cried out, as the mistletoe curled over his head with a seeming will of its own, only to freeze like he saw his life passing before his eyes when he saw the person who had ended up underneath the curling vine with him: Luna Lovegood. "Oh, no, Luna, I'm so sorry, we don't have to..."

"You do, actually!" Ginny Weasley called excitedly, while the room broke out into a chorus of ecstatic giggles, and not just from the girls. Everyone there seemed to have a soft spot for Neville, even if that didn't necessarily make them want to *partner* with him. "It's enchanted mistletoe! Look at the sign! Oh, that wasn't there before today, was it?"

The sign read, in Dobby's distinctive large block handwriting, painted in merry red and green: MISTLETOE IS MAGICALLY BINDING! NO ESCAPE WITHOUT REAL LONG KISS! HAVE A VERY HARRY CHRISTMAS, DUMBLEDORE'S ARMY! There was an adorable caricature of two non-gendered stick figures smooching beneath, a cartoon heart shooting out between them.

"This is your doing, isn't it?" Hermione said, whirling on Fred and George, who protested their innocence.

Draco was ready to start shooting fireballs at the mistletoe with his non-dominant hand until he saw Luna's face: flushed, yes, like she rarely got except from exertion. But not unhappy, and not scared, not in the least. "Will this work, do you think?" she asked merrily, and pressed a kiss to Neville's cheek. There was a chorus of oohs and ahhs, and Neville's mouth fell open in blissful shock, but the mistletoe doesn't budge. "Oh, Neville, it looks like we'll have to kiss on the lips!"

"You alright, Luna?" Draco called cautiously, though Neville looked the petrified one.

"Alright," Neville said, taking a deep breath, as if it took every single Gryffindor fiber in his body to summon the courage, and his broad honest face seemed to set with determination. "I'll kiss you then now, Luna, if that's alright with you."

This would be Luna's first kiss. He didn't think Tom had appeared to her corporeally before the end. If he had, and kissed her, Draco would have to summon that spirit back to kill him himself.

A more feminine wave of titters swept through at the awkwardness of Neville's manner, but Luna just stared up at Neville happily. "Alright," she said mildly, and leaned up on her tiptoes, closing her eyes and pursing her lips to be kissed.

Neville leaned down and pressed his parted lips to hers, a soft smacking sound as they came together that echoed in the air. He pushed his mouth to hers eagerly, with a continued awkwardness that made it clear this was his very first kiss too. Luna looked almost as awkward as he did, clearly not knowing how to kiss either, but she leaned up into the kiss a bit before Neville pulled away.

Hooting and hollering greeted them from all sides, as thunderous an applause as had greeted Draco shielding against all those stunners or more, with Draco amidst the cheers. He slapped his working hand against his non-working hand, and told himself not to panic.

Finally, Luna stepped back from Neville with an ear-to-ear smile. "Happy Christmas, Neville," she said, and joined Cho and her friend to leave for Ravenclaw Tower together.

"Neville," Ginny said in alarm, going over to where Neville was still standing in place, though the predatory mistletoe had curled and grown itself away. "Neville, you're bleeding."

Neville's hand moved slowly from his own lips to his cheek, which had a red mark on it that hadn't been there before. "Oh," he said dazedly. "Yeah. Her earring bit me. It was awesome."

Draco stayed in the Room of Requirement as long as he could, finding feeling at last returning to his right hand, but it was taking some time. He used his wand in his non-dominant hand to begin gathering up poor Dobby's wrecked decorations, levitating them to a sack, while Harry fussed about in the corner, organizing the pillows. He only realized they were the room's sole inhabitants again when Harry's voice called over, "You don't have to clean all that up, you know."

"I did it, so..." Draco began, and then Harry made a concerned sound and walked over.

"Why are you using your left hand?" Harry asked suspiciously, and took Draco's right hand in his. He frowned at the limpness of it, flopping like a dead weight against his. At the sensation of the warmth of Harry's skin, though, the needle-prick flickers of fizzing sensation began to buzz back twice and then thrice as fast, as if Harry's magic was restoring his hand by its touch. When Harry tried to let his hand go, Draco kept the weight of it on top of his.

"It just feels kind of limp and heavy," Draco said defensively, and Harry frowned.

"God, Draco. Of course, after what you just pulled... Has it ever had this problem before?"

"No," Draco admitted weakly, and Harry laughed ruefully, shaking his head.

"You're so reckless," he said, a note of reluctant fondness in his voice. "Sometimes I really do think you should have been in Gryffindor."

"I would have already driven you round the bend," Draco said confidently, forcing himself to look Harry in the eye. Even though Harry taking his hand had brought them very, very close, between rows of battered bookshelves, cracked golden baubles still crunching underfoot.

"You'd be begging *not* to go back to Hogwarts so you wouldn't have to deal with me, I promise you..."

Harry bit his lip, looking down and flushing. Suddenly it was like they had never fought at all, if Draco could still have that effect on Harry with one stupid joke. "I know you're really mad at me, but I'd still want you in Gryffindor." He waited for a long pause. "Aren't you going to say you'd still want me in Slytherin?" he asked petulantly.

"That depends," Draco drawled, and felt his fingers almost completely returned to feeling as he traced his fingertips over Harry's palm. "Would you be trying to smother Theodore Nott every night in his sleep? Corpses leave such an *indelible* stench."

"I- I'm- I'm sorry, I'm really sorry about that," Harry breathed, and was officially the one to crack first. Draco felt a rush go through him triumphant enough, it was almost like he had been the one to catch the Snitch after all. Maybe Harry won in a sporting match, but how much did that matter, if he could still bend Harry to his will in the end?

What could be more like winning than having Harry standing here with him, face to face, hand in his coaxing out the last bit of sleepy fuzziness and making it perfectly alive again? Those green eyes full of delicious repentance... those pretty pink lips gone white with tension, only to loosen as a slight pout crept in... the curl of his dark hair which was getting longer again, thick around his face, and this close there was that Amortentia smell...

"I'm sorry about everything, Draco," Harry said earnestly. "I'll do whatever you want to make it right, I just... I just really, really miss you. And it's Christmas, and it'll be Sirius's first official Christmas free, so..."

"Oh," Draco drawled, pulling his hand away and tilting his head contemptuously. "So you're saying this because you don't want it to be awkward for *your* godfather. How *noble* of you."

Harry grabbed his hand again, squeezing it. "No. I just know I've been an idiot, as big as you can get, and I don't want anyone else to suffer for it. Not him or Remus, and least of all you. Not that being without me as a friend means you've been, er, suffering- and *I* haven't been suffering- well, I mean, kind of, but- I'm not explaining this well, you know I'm not as good with words as you..."

"Alright, fine, fine, you're forgiven, stop groveling-" Draco huffed, only to stop cold at the glistening white that was curling in out of the corner of his eye. "Salazar, Harry, look up!"

Harry frowned, not seeming to process it at first, and then wonder filled his face. "Mistletoe," he breathed, and the horror that Draco had expected didn't appear there, only a slow-spreading blush across his handsome face, color rising high in his cheeks, which looked like they would be very hot to the touch- hotter even than his fingertips, which stopped where they had been trailing up and down Draco's palm to linger there.

"Enchanted mistletoe," Draco corrected. It was a very important distinction, and Draco was very proud of his ability to make it, or even to think once he looked up and saw what it meant he and Harry had to do. Suddenly the taste of Amortentia came to his tongue, those lips that fluctuated so uncertainly before him marked for his by some law of the universe or some

aberration in it, some turning of Hecate's wheel, sending berries growing overhead and Harry's eyes locked on his with perhaps something of the same thoughts in that head, something of the same-

Desire?

Harry leaned forward and kissed Draco on the cheek, just as Luna had with Neville. Nothing changed above, so he shifted backwards, holding his hands together behind his back and rocking on his heels. The thought came to Draco, whether Harry might be doing that to hold his hands back from touching...

It made Draco's hands go out and clasp around the back of Harry's neck, holding him and staring into those darting green eyes, trying to get them to focus on him. Then they did, and Draco just had to keep reminding himself to breathe.

"It was worth a shot," Harry said, rather breathless himself. The low husky tone of his voice was so different from him usually, it was obscene.

"Harry," Draco said, and the words all dried up on his tongue. Harry said he was the one who was good at talking, but he had nothing. All he had was a million reasons why he shouldn't let them do this, why he should at least try to Vanish or explode the damn mistletoe rather than just giving in, because he had to protect himself, protect *Harry*, from what he wanted.

Harry had said Draco was the only thing that made him feel safe this past summer, but it was the opposite for Draco. Nothing made Draco feel less safe, turned agitated and off-balance, nothing made Draco's mind unravel and his plans go up in smoke the way Harry Potter did, the way he always had. No one made him angrier, no one made him feel so weak in the knees, no one made him hurt like this, no one made him want like this. Maybe no one ever would. There was only Harry, standing there before him, eyes wide and expectant on Draco's for them to give the answer, when there was not and would never be an answer...

"What are you waiting for?" Draco drawled, affecting nonchalance. "Get it over with then-"

"'Get it over with'? Like some ordeal? Would you rather have gotten caught with Neville?"

Draco pretended to consider. "He is getting fitter these days, isn't he-"

Harry's expected jealousy didn't come. His eyes had gone to Draco's lips once they began speaking. The tip of Draco's tongue darted out to wet them, and from the feel of Harry's hot breath right against it, it was like they were already kissing.

And of course, this had happened before. Draco had kissed Harry last year under the Imperius, to lead him to his doom just as Trelawney had prophesied. Harry had bled at Draco's hands. Draco had cut *open* the hand that came now to push Draco's hair out of his eyes, sending butterflies through his stomach. Draco had secured ropes around the wrists he felt brush his ears, dripped blood from that rough palm which was stroking over his face with the most unreasonable bit of reverence, because Draco was not something to touch, he was something to hurt-

"Draco, we..." Harry took a deep breath. "Do you think we should just..."

"Yeah," Draco breathed, licked his lips again. "Do you want to, or..."

"I don't know how," Harry said, nervousness flaring in his eyes again, and Draco smiled. It was the most addictive thing in the world: Harry Potter, looking at you like you were the only thing that mattered in it.

"You *don't know how*? It's pretty straightforward, Harry," Draco drawled. "But if you're scared-"

"I'm not scared," Harry insisted, looking indeed less scared, and more spellbound. He swallowed hard, Adam's Apple bobbing in his throat. "You're the one who should be-"

"Scared? Of you?" Draco breathed. Harry's hands hadn't moved from Draco's face, or Draco's from the nape of Harry's neck. "*Please*. Do you honestly think I'm scared of *anything*? I'm a Malfoy, Harry. I'm a Black. I'm Frankenstein. I'm *Grindelwald.* So- *I'll* just get it over with, alright?"

Harry nodded shakily, and Draco closed that final breath and kissed him.

In an instant it felt irrevocable, like sealing their lips was sealing a covenant. Draco barely remembered their first kiss, from under the haze of the Imperius. All of the sensation felt completely new, as the single most impossible thing there could ever be happened, and Harry's mouth fell open under his, letting him taste him.

Harry's lips were soft and awkward and uncertain, and they melted beneath Draco's touch, letting Draco press an adoring kiss and suck down to taste, to memorize what he worshiped, what he hated and feared, what felt so frightened to be kissed and yet still was kissing Draco back-

Draco let out a soft embarrassing noise as Harry pressed in, breathing hard into the kiss but doing anything but pulling away. Harry's hands had gone into his hair, fitting in between the light feathery strands. When he used two handfuls of it to pull Draco's face closer against his, the jolt low in Draco's body made him moan again into Harry's mouth.

The feeling of Harry's hands in his hair had always done something to him, but now, when he was *kissing* him... maybe because there was something possessive about it, an intimate way to keep hold of him. Harry was not going to let him go, and Draco didn't want him to...

Harry moaned into the kiss, and Draco's grip tightened around the back of Harry's neck, eyes opening to the sight of those green eyes he'd obsessed over so many years, closer than he had ever seen them. Only Harry's glasses were in the way, bumping against Draco's face, but he could see the haze of green behind them, less jade and almost an oneiric sea-green. Like a view of the ocean opening up before him, a wave rocking them together as the warmth of Harry's kiss traveled from Draco's waiting mouth to his whimpering throat and pounding heart and clenching stomach and through him, down and all the way through...

Harry's teeth clashed against his, inexperienced and raw. Draco slid his tongue along those teeth and Harry was the one whimpering then, clutching Draco's hair so hard it hurt, the tug going straight from his scalp to where Draco felt it most, throbbing. Harry pulled Draco into the kiss by his hair, so roughly it wrenched a cry out of Draco's mouth-

Harry pulled back, pupils huge and blown out, hair in his eyes, glasses askew. He straightened them reflexively, with his lips still parted like they wanted to be kissed again. But on his face was a dawning panic. "Oh, I- God, I pulled your hair," Harry said, and stepped out from under the mistletoe. "I'm sorry, I got, erm, carried away... I'm so..."

Draco could see a version of himself that raced forward and silenced those words on Harry's lips, dove into Harry's kiss like going underwater and walked him back into the wall, over all the many versions of Harry's face that Draco had cracked, walked him back until they were stumbling over the cushions and Draco could pull Harry down and tell him, *Go on.* Get *carried away. Pull my hair if you want. Touch me anywhere you want. Do anything you want to me, Harry, I'm* yours-

But this was a world where Draco took a deep breath, smiled, and just said, "It's alright."

That made it a world where Harry stared at him and then ran.

Draco was left alone in the wreckage of Dobby's decorations, free to reach up and touch his lips now that Harry was gone. They felt the same, just a bit swollen, a bit wet, the way kissing always made lips, but nothing more was different than that. It was hard to believe they hadn't been changed by kissing Harry Potter.

His *body* felt changed. His body felt on *fire*. He could see so clearly the version of him that had been brave or stupid or selfish, whatever you wanted to call it, that had taken the kiss as just a beginning, that had made sure he could get the feel and memorize it not just of Harry's lips but his skin, everywhere, all over. His own skin felt throbbing with the need for Harry to touch it.

Draco walked over to the wall and let his head fall against it, banging it there softly. "Get it together, Draco Malfoy," he said out loud. "You're just a thief. And you stole that too."

Fangs

Chapter Notes

Playlist

"SANGUIRENERE!"

Draco was hauled from under the covers, Severus's face looming over his in the candlelight. "Draco Lucius Malfoy! Do you have any explanation for why I just had to resort to blood magic to *open the curtains of your bed*?"

Severus's palm was indeed cut. He cast Vulnera Satentur with a humming noise and closed it at once. "What?" Draco said, staring up blearily. "I value my privacy."

"Have you packed for Christmas yet?" Severus asked impatiently. The other boys were stirring, poking their heads out of their curtains.

"Somewhat?" Draco said, trying to guess what could be going on.

"It matters not. Mr. Nott, you will pack Mr. Malfoy's trunk for him tomorrow, and I will get it to him. Mr. Nott is competent to handle any presents. Get dressed. Hurry!"

Draco snatched up his uniform and robes and ran for the bathroom, mind racing. *Something's happened to Sirius, and the last time I saw them, all I did was scream at him and Remus for not* loving *me enough, what's wrong with me...*

He raced back out in record time, finding Severus annoyed by anxious questions. "No, Mr. Crabbe, I will not tell you what is going on. No, Mr. Nott, Draco is not in any danger. No, Mr. Goyle, this will not impact your Quidditch team- I am sure Mr. Zabini is capable of running the final practices of the semester- there you are. Get your wand and go."

Draco dived onto his bed, grabbing not just his wand but the other thing he kept under his pillow: the moonstone dagger. Severus said nothing, just dragged him out. The fire was out in the common room fireplace, the night silent as the grave. Severus didn't offer any explanation even once they were up the stairs of the dungeons and going up more.

"Where are we going?" Draco had to rush to keep pace. He had rarely if ever seen his godfather move so quickly.

"The Headmaster's office," Severus said curtly, and Draco's stomach flipped.

"What did I do?" Draco stopped in the middle of the staircase. "Why am I being treated like a criminal?" Was it to do with blood magic? Against Umbridge, or Harry last year, or... the

time travel somehow?

And he didn't *think* he could get dragged to the Headmaster's office in the middle of the night, just for having kissed the Boy Who Lived. But it was a possibility to consider.

"If you had done something wrong," Severus hissed ominously, "I would not have had you bring your wand. This is a crisis in the Order of the Phoenix, behave as such!"

When they arrived at the entrance to Dumbledore's office, they were not the only ones, with McGonagall leading Fred, George, and Ginny, who weren't even dressed, and looked like they'd been woken by a horde of Dementors coming after them.

"Ron! Ron, is Ron alright-" Draco grabbed onto Fred's arm, losing his head. Fred didn't shake him off, just pulled him with them.

"It's our father," George said, and Draco had some of the guiltiest relief he had ever felt when he got inside and saw the bright flame of Ron's head, unhurt.

"Ron!" Draco exclaimed, running over and throwing his arms around him. It was a mark of how shaken up Ron must be that he didn't squirm and laugh at the show of affection. Instead, Ron's hands went up trembling to grab onto Draco's shoulders, as if to ground him on something stronger than himself. Draco remembered Neville telling him, *You're the one who makes us feel brave.*

"Harry, what's going on?" Ginny asked. Harry was also there, looking much the worse for wear. He was a different person than the one Draco had just kissed, as if he had suffered some terrible blow, or struck one. He had the two-way mirror he used with Sirius, gripping it so tight his knuckles were white. "Professor McGonagall says you saw Dad get hurt-"

"Your father has been injured in the course of his work for the Order of the Phoenix," Dumbledore explained. Draco wracked his memory. Mr. Weasley hadn't died in the blue loop, so this was either non-fatal, or *new.* "He has been taken to St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. I am sending you back to Grimmauld, which is much more convenient for the hospital than the Burrow. You will meet your mother there." Ron's grip tightened on the collar of Draco's robes. As he had in the Chamber of Secrets, Draco reached down and grabbed Ron's hand.

"How're we going?" Fred asked. "Floo powder?"

"No," Dumbledore said, "Floo powder is not safe at the moment, the Network is being watched. You will be taking a Portkey." He gestured towards a kettle on his desk. No Triwizard Cup, but it would do the job in a pinch. "We are just waiting for Sirius to answer..."

"Harry?" Sirius's voice came from the mirror. "Did I hear you calling? It's the middle of the night, you woke up Remus..." Harry handed it to Dumbledore without a word.

"Sirius," Dumbledore said gravely, "Arthur Weasley has been attacked. He was brought to St. Mungo's. With your permission, we'd like to send the Weasley children and their mother to meet at Grimmauld."

"Of course," Sirius's voice agreed, shocked but determined. "Anything we can do."

"Harry and Draco are coming home early for the break. They will all be arriving by Portkey shortly. Please lower any wards to them."

"Done," said Sirius, and just like that, the swift interchange between adults ended. Not a second too soon, as almost immediately after, flames appeared at the center of the office, lovely and golden and leaving a phoenix feather floating in the air behind them.

"It is Fawkes's warning." Dumbledore caught the feather. "Professor Umbridge must know you're out of your beds... Minerva, Severus, go and head her off- tell her any story-" McGonagall obeyed, but Severus lingered, a question in his eyes for Draco.

"It's alright," Draco said with his bravest smile. "Happy Christmas, Severus."

Severus nodded and raced out after McGonagall.

"Come here, then," Dumbledore ordered. "And quickly, before anyone else joins us."

They gathered with no time for questions. "You have all used a Portkey before? Good. On the count of three, then... one... two... three."

The last thing that Draco wanted after last year was to be awoken and thrust immediately into using a Portkey. But there was no help for it, and the blue loop couldn't be taken for granted. If Draco caused more delay than in the original timeline, for all he knew, that could be the difference between Ron's father dying or living. He had learned in the graveyard that people could die differently this time around, as if Wormtail's life had been traded for Diggory's. And Mr. Weasley's was not a life to so easily trade.

The Portkey arrived to the sound of Kreacher's irritating voice complaining, "Back again, the blood traitor brats. Is it true their father's dead?"

Sirius lunged, but Remus pulled him back, both in their nightclothes looking frightened. Draco couldn't hear what Remus was saying over the rushing in his own ears. He was remembering what Kreacher had done to Dobby this summer. In the face of upheaval he hadn't been able to predict, his temper snapped.

"One less blood traitor in these halls, then," Kreacher sneered. "Good riddance-"

"Langlock!" Draco yelled, and Kreacher's tongue glued itself to the roof of his mouth. Turned out, as suspected, that curse worked on house elves.

"Oh!" Ginny cried out, scooting back on the floor at the unfamiliar sight. Fred and George also recoiled, but Draco casting Langlock was such an old sight to the others, none so much as blinked.

"Draco!" Remus embraced both him and Harry. "Take the curse off Kreacher and send him away, we don't have time to deal with him..."

"Fine." Draco rolled his eyes and whirled on Kreacher. "I've had enough of you, you hear me? One more word like that, one more 'blood traitor' or 'Mudblood' out of you in my presence *ever*, and your tongue is locked permanently! Finite incantatem! OUT!" Kreacher fled past the hanging red lights and holly, not daring another word.

No one looked very sorry for Kreacher, though Ron gave a mirthless laugh that made Draco's chest hurt to hear. "No one tell Hermione he did that to a house elf, he'll never hear the end of it."

Maybe this sort of thing was why Remus and Sirius were more eager to have *Harry* as their son.

"Harry, what's going on?" Remus asked. Harry got an evasive look on his face, turning to stare at the Christmas tree instead, a faded blue-green decorated all in golden baubles and red and gold lights. The glow of the lights off Harry's face showed the strain there all too well. Harry's scarlet pajamas were stiff with dry sweat, like he'd been woken not by McGonagall but a nightmare.

"Tell us everything?" Remus asked, in that quiet reasonable way impossible not to obey.

"I was asleep," Harry said, "And I had a dream, but it wasn't an ordinary dream. I think it came from Voldemort. I dreamed Mr. Weasley was attacked by a giant snake-"

"Nagini?" Draco gasped, and covered his mouth when all the eyes went on him. "You know her. She... she was in the graveyard with us."

"I... I don't know, I didn't, er, see it clearly," Harry said, voice going more evasive, and he had never been a good liar. It was stupefying, that he could be hedging the truth at a time like this. "Anyway, it was bad. Mr. Weasley was sleeping on the floor, and the snake- maybe it was that one- the snake was on a mission. But Mr. Weasley was under an invisibility cloak, and then he woke up and saw the snake, and drew his wand, so the snake just lunged on him- breaking his ribs, it was tearing all into his body, there was so much blood..."

Ginny covered her face with her hands. Fred hugged her between him and George, while Ron grabbed for Draco's hand again.

"I woke up everyone screaming, and Neville got Professor McGonagall. She took me to Headmaster Dumbledore, and they found out he really had been attacked... I know what it was, it was this connection I've had with Voldemort, since the graveyard... my scar's being hurting..."

As soon as they heard more details, the Weasleys were naturally raring to take action, against any common sense. First they wanted their mother, then they wanted to run right to St. Mungo's. Even after Sirius and Remus explained Mr. Weasley had been hurt on Order business, and it would be compromising for them to show up before it was publicly known.

"What does that matter?" George argued.

"It matters because we don't want to draw attention to the fact that Harry is having visions of things that are happening hundreds of miles away!" Sirius argued back. So it was, that connection to Voldemort he'd been screaming about to Dumbledore. "Have you any idea what the Ministry would make of that information?"

Fred and George looked unconvinced, while Ron's grip tightened on Draco's hand. Draco interrupted curtly. "Shut your mouths. Don't any of you know how to keep your heads in a crisis? Is there anything you can *do*? Are you all trained mediwizards, and *that* explains why the twins got so few OWLs? Please. If you'd been around anything a hundredth as dangerous as I have, you'd have learned, if you can't help, stay out of the way or you'll just make things worse!"

An impressive silence greeted Draco's pronouncement, before Remus took a more empathetic tack. "I can't imagine how all of you must be feeling right now. This is your father. But he's in the hands of the best doctors money can buy, and Draco's right. At this stage, with him safe at St. Mungo's and in treatment, we wouldn't be able to see him right away. We would just be in the way. So I know it's hard, but please, try and stay put with us and wait."

"Fine," Fred muttered, but he and George looked still ready to make a break for it and try to Floo to St. Mungo's.

"Come on, we're going upstairs," Draco ordered. "Now!" He marched them one by one in a line up the stairs, past where the elf heads had used to hang, up to his room. He found it as he had left it, like someone had done charms or dusting, pictures and furniture intact.

Ron stared hard at a Polaroid of Draco and Hermione at the Muggle World Cup final, both proudly displaying yellow-green Brazil souvenir cups they had forgotten at the stadium. Draco could see why Ron was staring, even aside from the unguarded prettiness of Hermione's smile. The careless joy on that beaming face belonged to a different world than the one they had fallen into- fallen, thanks to Draco's inability to kill Pettigrew just one year sooner.

But Draco couldn't afford to get in his head right now. He had to seem so strong, it shamed the rest of them. "Okay, here we are," he said crisply. "We're staying up here tonight. No exceptions. There's a bathroom over there, so no excuse for leaving the room to piss-"

"Who put you in charge?" Fred scoffed.

"The past," Draco said, a strange enough answer to get their attention. "That is, the fact that I, unlike the rest of you, know actual Death Eaters, and how they operate. And I'm telling you, this isn't going to be fatal."

An awkward silence reigned, before Ginny seemed to rally herself for the others' sake. "I've never even been in here before. I like the colors."

"No, you have. We saw it once, when we first got to Grimmauld," George said, with a look at Fred. "Remember what I said then?"

"I said," Fred said, with a smile more for the memory of laughter than any laughter now, "That it was a shame Draco was gay, because this was a room that would draw in girls like a half-price sale on Sleek-Eazy's at Gladrags. Gay or not, Ginny isn't staying in Draco's bed-"

"Who said *she'd* be in my bed?" Draco drawled. "She'd have to fight for that, it's bound to be a heavily contested position." He tossed his head, and wished he'd had the time to comb his hair. Its wavy tangles spoiled the gesture's effect. The realization how bad his hair looked made him cast a nervous glance at Harry. It seemed the near-death of one of his best friends' fathers wasn't enough to stop Draco worrying what Harry thought of his hair. "Sirius and Remus will bring up mattresses for all of us, you'll see."

"From what? Telepathy?" Fred asked skeptically. "This room was bluer back then..."

"Just wait. Caeruleum inflamarae!" Draco cast. The old wreath of blue flames came up around the walls, bluebell flames in their corners rising in memory of where they had once been. When Draco glanced towards deathly-silent Harry, the flames at least made his troubled eyes soften.

As if on cue, in came Sirius and Remus, levitating mattresses, and lined the floor with them. There was only room for three, with leaving space to walk, but with Draco's bed there and most of them family, Remus said it should be enough. When Fred complained they weren't here for a bloody sleepover, Remus said he didn't think any of them should be alone right now, in a tone so professorial that even the twins didn't dare oppose him.

Remus used a neat spell to make up beds for them on the floor, with sheets, pillows, and blankets Sirius levitated up in a second trip. Sirius pulled Harry out into the hallway, for a presumed godfatherly round of psychiatric intervention. Surely now would not be the time to propose adoption, though the thought soured Draco's stomach. Meanwhile, Remus gathered the Weasleys for stern warnings, and Draco went to change to pajamas. He was the only one who'd bothered to get dressed for the trip.

When he came back, Sirius and Remus had left, and the Gryffindors had worked out that as the girl, Ginny got her own bed, then Fred and George had one, and then Ron and Harry. But Draco caught Harry looking up longingly towards Draco's taller bed. "Come up and sit up here for a minute," Draco said. Harry's eyes focused meaningfully, only to go distant once he realized Draco was beckoning literally everyone.

"Oh, look," George sniped. "The Death Eater expert on his throne. About to tell us why you know better than us? Just because you can block 27 stunners-"

"If I couldn't block 27 stunners," Draco countered, "Would you have listened to me and come up here in the first place?" No one had a quick retort, so Draco acted as if that proved his point. "Now listen, your father is going to be fine-"

"You can't know that," Ginny said, in a tone like the tears she had been fighting back were coming closer, with all the bustling about done.

"I can know that," Draco said patiently. "Because it's Nagini. And if she wants to kill someone, she eats them after. Harry, you didn't see Nagini actually eating Mr. Weasley's

flesh, did you?"

"No." Harry buried his face in his hands, looking unaccountably guilty. "Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God..."

Harry's agitation was contagious. "Bloody hell, Draco, are you trying to creep us all out?" Ron asked testily, patting Harry on the back. "How would you even know that? Is it something about the type of snake?"

"No, it's about Nagini," Draco emphasized. Granted, he couldn't explain why he knew about her, but a person shouldn't have to watch a hideous monster eat that many half-dead bodies without the right to claim *some* authority on the subject. "My father told me stories from the first war when I was growing up, okay?"

"Did he ever say anything about our uncles?" Fred asked suddenly. "On our mum's side. The Prewett brothers. Fabian and Gideon Prewett-"

The talon wand almost seemed to pulse in Draco's pocket.

"Fred, mate, calm down, he's not like his father," Ron said, with a casual confidence that made Draco feel almost genuinely strong. "You know what Draco tried to do in that graveyard."

"No, I know," Fred said. His face was eerie without a trace of humor, halfway to a corpse. "I just want to know if anyone in your family- if they ever talked about them. Was your father one of the ones who killed them?" Fred flopped back against Draco's pillows, and George began to play with his twin's sleeve absently. "They kind of sounded... I don't know, like Fred and I, from stories Mum told. She doesn't talk of them much, but..."

"I did think they sounded like you and George!" Ginny exclaimed. "All funny and goofy and super close. Laughing all the time."

"Yeah, they did," George agreed. "Wonder at what point they stopped laughing."

Perhaps after a spell cast by the wand in Draco's pocket, but then, everyone in this room probably knew that already. "Come on, Weasley clan," Draco said, trying for irreverence. "It's not time to start reviewing the family graveyard. Your father's not going to need his own plot, so save the burial funds for a rainy day-"

"You can't promise that." Fred took out his wand to dim some of the flames. The light over his face faded with them. "Maybe now, but not forever. He's a member of the Order. It's a war now, which means any of us could die."

"Don't say that, mate," Ron said immediately, but Ginny sat up straighter, leaning in.

"It's true, though, isn't it?" she said intently.

"It's weird, the twins being serious," Draco lamented. "Stop it, it's freaky. Makes me feel like the world is really ending."

George came to his twin's defense. "You just told us how lucky we should feel, that the massive flesh-eating snake Harry saw biting our dad didn't seem to want to *eat* him- Harry, if you're holding anything back-"

"I'm *not*," Harry said, too vehemently to possibly not be.

"You're being so quiet," Ginny fretted, and reached over to squeeze his hand. Her arm stretched across Draco to make the motion. Draco was tempted to whack it.

Was this it? A shared moment of fear? Thrown together in the dramatic circumstances of war? Was Harry meant to comfort her and begin their love story? Draco wanted to chuck them out of his room and shove them down the stairs at the thought.

"It's true, though," Fred said, and let his brother take his hand, but didn't hold it in return. "Any of us could get killed at any time. The rest of us could just get woken in the middle of the night like this to be told. *Any* night. It's lucky none of us are dead already. The odds would say, not everyone in this room is going to survive the war."

Draco hadn't brought his draught of peace. He wondered if there was such a thing as draught of war. If there was, it felt like Fred had just forced it down his throat. He wished there was a way he could excise the knowledge that Fred would die from his head.

"It's just a question," Fred went on, "Of who out of all of us will be the one to die-"

"Cut it out!" Draco snapped. "None of us is going to die!"

Ron poked at Draco's arm. "You mean it? How can you be so confident?"

"None of you will die because I'll protect you. I promise."

"You can't be everywhere all the time," Ginny said, and George ruffled her hair.

"That's what your big brothers are for," George said fondly, but Draco was undeterred.

"Watch me!" Draco said defiantly. "You'll think you're doomed, about to get chewed up by some massive hungry serpent, or tortured to death by that noseless shark-looking snakefucker-"

"What?" Ginny frowned.

"He means You Know Who," Ron explained, more used to Draco's vernacular.

"You'll think you're done for, preparing to meet your maker with that irrational Gryffindor courage that won't ever run from a fight, and what do you know? *I'll* be there. I'll save you. So don't say that. I'm too powerful. No one in this damn room is ever going to die."

Harry sat up at the bottom of the bed, dragged out of his stupor. "Everyone dies eventually."

"Nope," Draco said nonchalantly. "Not us."

"Of natural causes, though," Ginny said logically. "There's old age."

"Not us," Draco insisted. "We're never getting old."

There was real humor in Fred's voice again. "So no one in this room is ever going to die, Draco, that's your promise?"

"Exactly. If you doubt it, well, that's just showing the incredibly limited nature of your Gryffindor intellect."

The others were laughing, tension broken. Somehow, all of Draco's blustering had made it feel like Arthur Weasley had gone from dead to alive again.

"Just us?" Ginny asked, something so naive in her voice, it was like she almost believed him.

"No," Draco said impatiently. "Of course not. Hermione, Luna, Neville, they're never dying either, I'm not having it. So that's the immortal ones. We can fight a war, yes, but you can all rest secure in the knowledge that Draco Malfoy has declared you immune from death."

Even if his bluster couldn't keep his vision from turning the blue flames red over Fred Weasley's head, a target forming, day of reckoning coming closer. But he could pretend he couldn't see it.

"So that's..." George counted on his fingers. "Eight of us, then. Four Weasleys, then Draco, Harry, Hermione, Luna- four not. We're the ones who can never die."

Ginny laughed louder, kicking out her foot at him. "You forgot Neville, you arsehole."

"Oh, no," Fred said in faux-seriousness, "We have to debate whether Neville should be granted admittance to this hallowed group. It's like a subgroup of the DA. Very hush-hush, very exclusive. And I don't know if Neville is making the grade."

"No, he's making it," Draco said happily.

"What, because he fancies your cousin?" Ron asked, and both twins' ears peaked up at the sound of gossip.

"You think that because they kissed under the mistletoe?" George asked eagerly.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "No, because Neville's obsessed with her."

"So speaks the romantic expert," Fred teased. "Our little sister the player. How is Michael Corner? Broken his heart yet, maneater?"

"Shut up!" Ginny laughed, and fraternal shoving broke out in spades. Draco saw Harry look up at the redheaded knot and smile, though just an observer to the companionable silliness that had replaced the dread.

"Do you really think that mistletoe was magically binding?" Ron mused. "No one actually tried to step out, did they. I mean, Dobby put up that sign, but..."

Harry shot a sharp look at Draco. Draco hoped that look didn't give anything anyway. They hadn't actually discussed whether they would tell their friends what had happened. Draco had just assumed they wouldn't.

He didn't know why. Maybe because he didn't think they'd told how he pulled Harry through the cup Portkey, a cursed kiss on that hellfire night. But mistletoe was just mistletoe. Mistletoe set up by *Dobby*, which suspiciously only seemed to target Dobby's friends who were crushing on each other...

They'd all been had. Dobby should be ashamed of himself.

Draco resolved to buy Dobby something extra nice for his birthday.

The twins kept teasing Ginny about Corner, with Ron indignant in the background, and Harry watching with distant, vacant eyes. Eventually, they seemed to tire themselves out enough gossiping to doze off. Except for Harry.

When Draco was woken by footsteps on the stairs, he lifted his head to see Harry already sitting up, eyes wide open. He didn't seem to have slept for a minute, and he slid out of bed beside a still-sleeping Ron to pad out. Draco followed him, and they came face-to-face with a frantic-looking Mrs. Weasley. Her usually friendly, ruddy face was dead pale, but her gaze relaxed with maternal affection when she saw Harry. Draco stepped aside to let her catch Harry in one of the warmest hugs he had ever seen, only to suppress a squawk when her arm shot out and dragged him in with him.

"He's going to be alright," she said weakly, her eyes full of indescribable relief, and Draco was suddenly reminded what her Boggart had been.

Draco wondered what his own mother's Boggart would be.

"Can we go see him?" Harry whispered.

"Ron- Ginny- the twins," Mrs. Weasley said, anxiety not gone from her voice.

"Look," Draco said, and opened up the door. He waved a hand to make the blue lights shine a bit brighter, and the Patronus-blue hue made the four heads of fire-red hair stand out like phoenix feathers in the night.

"Oh," Mrs. Weasley said, hand over her mouth, relieved by the sight of her children safe and sleeping. "Oh, there they are. All four of them. Oh, and they're sleeping, the dears. Bless them. Oh, bless them." She grabbed onto the wall for balance, and Draco wished he knew her well enough to offer some form of reassurance.

"Should I wake them up?" Harry offered. "They'd want to know. Fred and George were all for charging the Floo and forcing their way in when we got here. Draco had to stop them."

"No, let them sleep, you must all be exhausted," she sighed. "We can tell them when they wake up, we might know more then. But he *is* going to be alright. We can all go and see him later. Bill's sitting with him now. He's going to take the morning off work."

"Are you alright, Mrs. Weasley?" Harry asked, radiating concern. She let him take her arm, both seeming to hold each other steady. Then they looked in again at the sprawled forms of the Weasley children, peaceful in sleep, Fred and George curled together. Mrs. Weasley's face took on a shaky exhausted smile.

"Don't worry about me," she said brusquely. "I'd best go off and get some rest myself. You boys too. Tell them when they wake if you like. Just sleep now, if you can! You hear me?"

"Yes, ma'am," Harry said. She gave him and Draco both another firm hug before going. Harry watched her leave, then quietly closed the door and sat down on the stairs. Draco sat down beside him and took out his wand. "You brought that?" Harry marveled, sitting without even his glasses, and Draco shrugged.

"Should I make a light?" Draco offered, and Harry shook his head.

"You should try and get back to sleep," Harry said, gaze already distant again. "You were sleeping before. I couldn't. Maybe I can now that I know Mr. Weasley is..."

He didn't seem able to finish that sentence. "What?" It was a very strange conversation they had ended up having, as their first after they kissed under mistletoe. "Worried what you'll see when you dream?"

Harry shuddered, arms wrapping around himself, and even in the dark, with only the slightest blue glow from inside, Draco could make out the color of Harry's eyes. "Draco, I... I didn't tell you, did I? I told Ron, right after it happened... I wasn't watching that snake- Nagini, you said- I wasn't watching it attack Mr. Weasley. I was the snake. I was inside it, doing it."

Harry said this like some great guilty revelation, but it wasn't. It was borderline uninteresting, in such a generally heightened context. "Yeah, that makes sense. You've been experiencing flashes of Voldemort's emotions, thoughts, feeling them yourself. Makes sense you'd see an experience through his eyes... in this case, his snake's. They've likely got some psychic connection as well. Be weirder for you *not* to see it like that."

Harry relaxed at Draco's lack of horror, like back in third-year, whenever Draco told him it was normal to feel as he did about Dementors. Merlin, Harry had far too many awful things happen to him to also be this hard on himself. "I... you think so?"

Draco nodded, but Harry just hunched over more, pulling his feet up to a higher step and resting his chin on his knees.

"Draco, I also... I haven't told anyone this... but I had this other thought. When we were taking the Portkey. I looked at Dumbledore and I wanted to hurt him. A lot. My scar was burning so hot... I hated him so much, and I wanted my fangs in him..."

Harry was speaking to essentially Dumbledore's murderer here. If he was looking for condemnation, he was barking up the wrong tree. "Oh, definitely flashes from the Dark Lord," Draco yawned, and Harry looked torn between relief and exasperation.

"I just told you I wanted to *kill Professor Dumbledore*, and you *yawn*?"

Join the bloody club. "Harry..." Draco swallowed back another yawn. "You're getting thoughts from snake-face, he hates Dumbledore and wants to kill him. Your scar means connection with snake-face, and it hurt when you thought it, mystery solved. Yeah, what a shock-"

"But Dumbledore, he-" Harry lowered his voice and leaned closer, eyes beseeching for understanding. "I *have* been angry at him this year. So angry. After he ignored me at the trials, and he's been so cold, like I did something wrong... I've been angry at everything, but especially him- it's like Voldemort is bleeding through sometimes, melding with me, like the bad parts of him are becoming part of *me.* With Dumbledore, I've felt..."

"Abandoned?" Draco offered.

"Betrayed. It's not like it's something I *couldn't* have thought-"

"Do you have *fangs,* Harry?" Draco asked impatiently. "Or is that a common metaphor your thoughts tend to take?" Harry's face went open, first from surprise and then sheepishness, but Draco wasn't done. "No, seriously, I'm asking. Open your mouth. Not a request, that's an order. Open your mouth for me. Okay, teeth forward." Draco reached out, fingers drawing over Harry's cheek, and traced his thumb slowly over Harry's teeth, the top and then bottom row. "Let's see... normal tooth, normal tooth, normal tooth... not a fang, not a fang... yeah, let's see, also not a fang..."

"Shut up," Harry breathed, nervous laughter in his voice, but Draco kept up until he had made his point far more than necessary. He liked touching Harry's mouth.

"Yeah, Harry, gotta say, not seeing any of these fangs," Draco said, pulling his hand away. But Harry caught it and held it against his cheek. "You think maybe it's more likely that was the venomous man-eating snake you'd just had in your head?"

Harry pulled the back of Draco's hand to his lips and kissed it, not saying a word.

Draco's stomach plummeted, body suddenly suffused in a different tiredness: the exhaustion of holding out against so much temptation for so long, it felt only a matter of time before he had to give in to it. He *could*. No one else was likely awake. There were empty rooms at Grimmauld. He could take Harry down to one and kiss him again, like what had only been hours ago, even if it felt much longer. He could do more, if Harry wanted, and he had the feeling that yes, Harry would-

"I'm sorry I pulled your hair earlier," Harry whispered against Draco's knuckles. "It was an awful kiss. I can't sleep thinking how stupid I was. I've been worried about Mr. Weasley, of course, but- I can't stop thinking of that either. Please just tell me you aren't angry-"

"'An awful kiss'?" Draco echoed, trying not to get offended and wake the house up. Were he and Harry talking about the same kiss? "Was it? In that case, *I* need to apologize-"

"No, I mean me, I was awful, I didn't know what I was doing," Harry babbled, letting Draco's hand go. "That's all I was saying, not you, not the kiss, that wasn't- wasn't awful at *all*- what were we talking about?"

"Apparently," Draco drawled, "You were giving me a performance review, and I was coming up wanting. Do let me know if you have any tips that could have made it less awful, I'm apparently in shocking need of edification-"

"I didn't mean it like that!" Harry protested. "Really! You- you were incredible at it. Your lips were so... so..."

"'So'?" Draco repeated, and watched Harry rake a hand through his hair. "'So' *what*, Harry? What *are* my lips?"

"Um," Harry said desperately, and then there were footsteps on the stairs.

"It's Remus," Draco said, recognizing the steady plodding tread. "He'll be mad if we're not in bed." Draco led them back inside, where he at least slept.

Mr. Weasley was obviously going to be fine. Draco couldn't see what all of the fuss had been about. Honestly, a part of him had to be resentful. Oh, Nagini had been merciful with this notorious blood traitor, but when it came to Severus, the best and bravest man that ever lived, she had to be on point? Nagini? More like nigiri, for how Draco would preferably make use of her. He'd eaten snake before- tasted like chicken- but never raw. Sashimi, maybe, with some avocado and eel sauce... was Draco getting hungry, waiting for the Weasleys and Harry to finish their sentimental visit?

It was hard work, trying not to look Tonks or Moody in the eye. They couldn't have thought of two worse Order members to escort Draco, for his own mental health. Granted, Draco hadn't actually had run-ins with the *real* Moody in either timeline, but Crouch had been a damn good actor. It was hard not to think the man before him wouldn't turn to him at any moment and start talking about how his wand had tortured the sanity out of the Longbottoms.

Eventually, Mrs. Weasley opened the door again, hustling students out and the Aurors in. "Really, what was the point of me coming to visit?" Draco called after her.

"You can go say hello once they have, Draco dear!" she called before the door closed.

Fred looked none too pleased to be ejected before the real business was to be discussed. "Fine," he said, "Be like that. Don't tell us anything."

"I didn't miss much, then?"

Fred and George produced their Extendable Ears and gave one to Harry. "No, you two tell me," Draco ordered, not wanting to put the younger ones through repeating anything grisly. So Ginny and Ron picked up the twins' strings, and they turned and began recounting the details of the visit. The most ominous detail was the special venom in Nagini's bite, which the doctors at St. Mungo's were still working to counteract. So Mr. Weasley's wounds were still bleeding, and he had to take constant blood-replenishing potions, but it sounded like that should be solved eventually. If not in time for Christmas.

Draco wished he had insight to offer on the topic, but really, he hadn't seen Nagini strike and leave her victims *alive* very long after. This was uncharted territory for him as well. He tried resolutely not to think of how Severus had died, and whether it had been ever-bleeding wounds from venom to do him in, rather than something direct and instantaneous like...

Always-bleeding wounds like Severus's spell. *Sectumsempra. Always cut.* That was how Severus had ended up. Draco began to laugh, even as he felt an unsteady feeling pulse through, tears coming to his eyelids and fingers beginning to buzz at the tips.

"I think I'm going to be sick," Draco gasped. "Where- is there a bathroom- never mind, I'll find one." Or a convenient potted plant, if the impending fit ended in puking.

"What the hell?" George complained. "Wouldn't have thought you all of people would be this squeamish-"

"Over just a description," Fred said, grinning ear to ear. "Imagine if he actually had to see some poor old bastard laid out on the ground, bleeding to death with unclosable wounds-"

"Fuck off!" Draco growled, and bolted as fast as he could. None of the three eavesdropping Gryffindors noticed.

He ran down a set of stairs, rearing and unsteady, and saw the words SPELL DAMAGE in large letters, which sounded good enough to him. He was panting for breath, and he tried breathing exercises until he saw a family walking past. He fled inside the ward, running until he was behind a corner. Then he sank to the ground, letting himself start to cry. He cast a Muffliato, then set his wand on his knees and buried his face against it.

"You're okay," Draco said to himself, pressing his nose into the bend of the talon wand to ground himself. "You're gonna be okay..." But even as his chest began to feel less tight, his limbs less outside his control, the wand seemed to warm against his face, not just from the heat of his own skin. He pulled away, but it pulsed the same, until Draco might have feared it would burn him, if he'd been in a state to particularly care about that eventuality. Instead, he kept his face to it, and damn if it branded this young face that Severus was right to call him so vain for-

Severus-

Draco felt a tug, like the pull of Avenseguim activated. He wondered if Harry had come to find him. He'd last cast the spell on the golden ring before the Third Task, naively thinking that even if Harry did end up kidnapped, there was no way Draco would be with him. He hadn't activated it himself, and he didn't think Harry would be wearing it. He hadn't seen it on his hand once since the graveyard. But he thought the pull might be Harry, so he followed. Even when he saw that it was leading him towards a closed ward, and he had to spell the doors open, he followed.

He snuck through the Janus Thickey Ward, which seemed to be for permanent spell damage. "Hey," Draco asked the first person he saw, a woman with her whole head covered in fur, "Does Gilderoy Lockhart live here?" He thought he remembered hearing that. Except no, Lockhart hadn't been Obliviated in the red line...

She barked in response. Draco jumped back, only to bump into another bed. There was a pale man with a passing resemblance to Severus, staring at the ceiling mumbling to himself. Draco stumbling against his bed didn't draw his attention, or even interrupt his mumbling. But a sound came from another room of a cheerful maternal voice, and then a flash of lime-green Healer robes coming out. "Oh, poor dears, has somebody fallen..."

Draco ducked behind the mumbling man's bed. She looked around quizzically before heading to what was probably her break room. The minute she was gone, Draco followed the tug towards the end of the room, closing a set of flowery privacy curtains before him to hide him from view should the witch return. His breath slowed, and he whispered "Harry?" as he felt the tug stop.

But what had felt like the draw to some incomplete, selfish form of salvation proved instead the transformation of the world, from imagined nightmares to the completed article. The woman he stood above had been sleeping, but his voice calling for Harry Potter awakened her.

She sat up slowly, her limp, dry white hair in wisps around her face making her look far older than her skin would suggest. But her eyes were old, dark and sunken in her gaunt face as if there was the accumulated weight of centuries balanced upon the pupils, forcing them backwards into her skull. He had hardly seen a more haunted-looking woman, even counting actual ghosts- he presumed this patient was alive- and yet there was almost something familiar about her. She opened her mouth, and Draco presumed she was about to tell him how they knew each other, but no sound came out.

"Did *you* summon me?" Draco asked, turning to the other bed, where a man was sitting in his hospital gown, staring motionlessly at the wall. When he turned at Draco's voice, he had the same prematurely aged look, the same sunken hopelessness to his dark eyes, but that wasn't what made Draco cry out and clamp his hand over his mouth, dropping his wand to the floor.

He recognized this man. He was far thinner than the photograph Draco had seen, as was the woman, but in the husband, the family resemblance was unmistakable. Especially having seen his son at 18 in the blue loop, almost grown up.

There was no mistaking it. This was Neville Longbottom's father.

Draco stared from his wand on the floor, back up to the Longbottoms. Neither had gotten out of bed, nor had either spoken, though Mrs. Longbottom's voice was still moving without making a sound. Then she had stretched out a hand towards Draco, and though she was meters away with no sign of getting up, Draco fell down from scrambling away from her so hard. He landed with his feet on his wand, kicking it and making it skid beneath the beds. His back hit the curtain, stretching it. He heard himself take a deep, shuddering breath, knowing them unmistakably now. He'd just been thinking of their photograph in Mad-Eye Moody's hands, being forced to identify them. He had been imagining the fall of Severus in the future, when Neville's world had fallen apart a long time ago, and the remnants were waiting here like revenants, accusation in their empty eyes-

Though that had to be Draco himself imagining it. Neither of them seemed sane at all, or even truly aware. Neither was moving towards him, but Mrs. Longbottom still had her hand

raised, fingers outstretched in the air now, terrible and beseeching. For what, he could not know. It felt for all the world like he was the one who had done this to them, the one who had put them there, and this *was* his fault, this was the meaning of his stolen power...

Draco scrambled beneath the beds on their metal rails and dove for the talon wand. He was so panicked he put it back in the wrong pocket, and his hand caught against the moonstone dagger. He stared at it spellbound for a moment, thinking of the two lives it had cost him to acquire this: Pammaque Periander and his Augurey Maledictus, whom he was almost certain had been a Maledictus, and once human before, so that was a second and third murder after Pettigrew. Here in front of him, Frank and Alice Longbottom felt like another pair.

He just left the dagger stained in his pocket, not caring about the blood that smeared along the talon wand as his trembling fingers let it go. He forced himself to leave the shallow slash across his palm as he climbed back to his feet, forced himself to peer around the curtain and be sure the coast was clear before walking out as steady and calm as if he had every right to be there. Then he cast Severus's Vulnera Satentur spell on his hand. He watched the cut close as if in a dream, not even sure whether he was breathing.

"Draco?" voices were calling from above, and Draco went up the stairs mechanically. This time, it was Harry's voice, so he knew that the pull was not what he had imagined.

"Hey," Draco said weakly. "Sorry, I just got freaked out by the twins being dickholes. Maybe I can wait and visit Mr. Weasley the next time, or when he gets out..."

"We'll be coming back on Christmas, if he isn't out by then," Mrs. Weasley said, eyes shooting daggers at the protesting twins. "You can see him then, no worries, Draco. Let's go."

He felt like he could have used someone else's hand to check his own mouth for fangs.

The Christmas Prayer

Chapter Notes

> Hey all, to answer a question about the Langlock, as Severus says in the first book, Draco can undo it with just Finite Incantatem, whereas others cannot, because he is the curse-caster, and it is specific to him.
>
> Anyway, enjoy! <3
>
> Playlist

Luckily, Draco had the excuse of 27 stunners to use the remaining angel's infusion after they got back from the hospital. He'd added a dark, blood-orange gold, his favorite Diospyros lotus scent his own innovation to cover the over-keen Angelica smell. He had to tell himself it was date-plums and not blood making the liquid reddish. Blood didn't turn your bathwater to bubbles. It just made it smell of iron.

He had been submerged in the onyx tub in his en-suite bathroom for maybe twenty minutes by the time he heard a tentative knocking at the outside room. "Draco, are you in here?"

"In here!" Draco called. Harry walked into the bathroom, only to freeze.

"Oh, sorry," Harry said quickly, "I didn't think you'd still be..."

Draco rolled his eyes. His wand and dagger weren't on him for once, and he would have felt uncomfortable without them in almost anyone's presence, but not Harry.

"I'll be in here way longer," Draco told him. "So if you really have to talk to me, you might as well sit and talk." It wasn't like Harry could see anything. He looked down to check, and yes, the deeper orange-red of the lotus had faded with time, but to a fizzing Snitch-gold, leaving his body only bared down to the shoulders. "There's even a settee."

"Okay, but why?" Harry marveled, as he perched himself gingerly on the antique, looking scared to sully the deep blue velvet upholstery. "Why do you have a settee in your bathroom? Do you get regular visitors here? It... it smells like you, like your bath... whatever you said that shampoo is that you use in your hair..."

Over the summer, Draco had found he liked to lie down after his infusions, sprawling out and dozing. The work of stealing from a lower room and levitating up an antique piece of furniture had been worth it, to indulge in the laziness of walking that many steps fewer than from bath to bed. But he didn't know if Harry would want to keep sitting there, if he knew how many times Draco had napped there. He wasn't risking it, not when Harry was radiating this much misery along with awkwardness.

"Don't you wish you knew," Draco teased, sinking lower into the bath. He felt an inappropriate heat when Harry's eyes followed. He hadn't thought he was done beating himself up for being a garbage human being yet. So it was very inconsiderate of anatomical features of his not to cooperate. "What is it, Harry? It seemed like something happened at St. Mungo's. I was just too busy being traumatized by the twins to see. Tell me."

"Okay," Harry said, and took a deep breath. "I guess I already told you about the vision I had of Mr. Weasley..." He was steeling himself like the words he spoke would end the chance of absolutely anything between him and Draco once he spoke him. He looked an absolute mess, but so gorgeous still, it was yet more proof the universe held unfair favoritism toward Harry Potter.

"But what we heard... Mrs. Weasley said she thought that Dumbledore's been waiting for me to see something like this, that he seemed worried about me. And Moody said everyone knows there's something funny about me... and that it means something that I saw the vision from inside the snake- maybe Voldemort was *possessing* me- Draco, maybe I really *was* inside that snake, hurting Mr. Weasley, and maybe I could hurt people again if I fall asleep-"

"Shut *up*, you gormless lackwit," Draco groaned, submerging his head under the bath to fortify himself with that reassuring smell, before having to face the depths of idiocy right there on his undeserving settee. "Did you not listen to me last night, when I told you that it was *normal* you'd see it from inside Nagini?"

Granted, Draco spoke with the authority of the blue loop, which had given no evidence he knew of regarding snaky possession, only overwhelming heroism and eventual triumph by the morbid Horklump on his settee. He threw his head back and flipped his newly wet hair behind his ears again, slicking it with annoyed fingers.

"I know, but Moody said-"

"Who do you think knows more about being possessed by the Dark Lord," Draco drawled. "Him, or *Luna Lovegood's cousin*?" He didn't get the impressed reaction he expected, though he did seem to have Harry's full attention, leaning forward so much on the settee he looked liable to slide off. "She's actually *been* possessed by him, genius. It was a blank for her. Nothing like your dreams. She was left trying to pick up the pieces of who'd been hurt, she didn't know any more than anyone else. She was hardly the advance guard sounding the alarm. Sense a discrepancy?"

"Um." Harry sounded to be having trouble focusing. "What?"

"Listen," Draco said, rolling his eyes harder, and all the more when Harry moved the settee closer to they could speak directly. He couldn't pretend to himself, though, that he didn't like having Harry's gaze burning into his shoulders. "Listen to me for once, will you?" *I'm having my own existential crisis right now, I can't handle dealing with one of yours.*

"What?" Harry said, and Draco sat up, pulling himself up by the rim of the tub to glare directly at him. Harry's eyes dropped, following the flow of water down Draco's collarbones, over his chest down to the top of his ribs where the water began, then back over his shoulders

again. His eyes seemed to settle finally on Draco's dragon birthmark, which he had once touched. "Sorry, erm, what did you say?"

"Harry," Draco said, sweeping his wet hair back between his fingers, "Are you listening?"

"Yes," Harry said, biting his lip and leaning forward still more. "Oh, I'm listening..."

Maybe it had been overly optimistic to think they could have a real conversation in this setting. Gryffindors weren't exactly known for multitasking. But the proof of it sent a selfish warmth through Draco. After weeks barely speaking, in the wake of that fight with Theo- in the wake of the kiss just yesterday, with the taste of Harry still half-there on his lips- he wanted those green eyes on him, those hunched shoulders in that cranberry jumper tense not from worry but from *him*. If he'd thought that attention was addictive before, he hadn't reckoned for what it would do to it to know the way Harry kissed...

"If I tell you," Draco said with a sigh, "That I know without a doubt that you are not being possessed by the Dark Lord, and *I* am the expert here on dark magic and not you, could you just *trust* me? Moody will get told or figure it out eventually. The wards around Hogwarts, the distance, possession, none of it works that way."

Draco leaned forward, feeling like some siren trying to lure Harry into the water. Except Harry was the one as lovely as a Veela, with uncertain desire turning all his worry into the paralysis of a boy under the Tantalus charm, with what he wanted right before him and yet as forever out of reach, as if it was only an illusion that had never existed at all- because, of course, it didn't.

"*Do* you trust me?" Draco finally asked, and Harry nodded. "Then can you stop insulting my hard-earned expertise in dark magic?"

Harry nodded again, licking his lips. "I- okay, Draco, yeah. If you're- if you're really that sure, I guess I can sleep..."

"You *should* sleep, Harry." Draco let himself relax into the bath again. "You might dream of something more pleasant than Nagini. It *is* going to be Christmas soon..."

Harry got a face like that had been some indecent innuendo, though Draco honestly hadn't meant it to be. "You know what I'm probably going to dream about now?" Harry said hoarsely, with a face like he was this close to dragging Draco out of the bath and onto the settee with him, to be used for purposes that would make its original purchaser roll in his unhallowed grave.

"What?" Draco smirked, lazily trailing his fingers through the water. He still had the feeling he had come away from this conversation with more peace of mind than Harry. "What will you dream of?"

Harry didn't seem to have the words. He got up and left the bathroom then, but not without turning to whisper, eyes fixed on Draco for a fugitive moment:

"What do you *think*?"

In the wake of visions of Nagini and torturing the Longbottoms, Draco found a more benign conflict awaiting him: Harry had found out Theo had been the one to pack Draco's bags. This had somehow launched him into a historic rage. It was bewilderingly excessive, but Draco left it, deciding to let it play out. If it left Sirius without any doubt that his beloved godson was enamored with his literal murderer of a nephew, well, Remus had already seemed in the know. No doubt he'd explain it to him.

Draco thought it was this obvious jealous infatuation that led Sirius to follow him up to his room to talk, but instead, he looked anxious for the contents of Draco's bags. "Did he pack it?" Sirius asked anxiously. "You said in your letters they were done." He eyed the suitcase on the bed like it held the entire contents of either heaven or hell inside.

In the chaos, it had been easy to forget the promised date was fast-approaching. Draco would be disappointed if the attack on Mr. Weasley kept Sirius from proposing before the students had to go back. He certainly had no intention of handing over the rings without being sure he'd be there to watch. If Remus tried to say no, Draco had thought once or twice, he wasn't above a sneaky Imperius curse or two under the table.

No, he was joking to himself.

Mostly.

"Let's see, then." Draco began to unpack, Sirius moving the clothes and wrapped presents aside. Then he saw a wrapped present he didn't remember: a small lacquered black and white opal box, with designs very much like the ones on the rings presumably inside. Draco leaned behind Sirius's back to quickly open it, and saw the rings inside its black velvet interior, one pressed neatly into a waiting slot for it.

"Theo," Draco breathed. This was clearly a box for a proposal, which Draco had never thought to get. In the short time leaving the finished rings in a box of his things under his bed, and Theo sending off the bag, he had somehow managed to get this together, the most thoughtful of gifts. Or Draco *hoped* it had been Theo. The idea of Severus having to put the finishing touches on Sirius's engagement ring presentation did not bode well for Draco's longevity.

"Can I see it? You wouldn't tell me anything about the rings, Draco..." Sirius sounded so anxious, either he was projecting his fear of rejection, or he didn't have the faith he'd seemed to about Draco's skills.

"Don't worry. If you don't like them, we'll go buy a pair in time. But we *will* buy them, because you've got your deadline, *beloved uncle.* Use these rings for it or don't, it doesn't matter. There isn't a speck of these not repurposed from your family's old jewelry."

Your *family, not ours. Harry's the one you want in your family. But he couldn't have given you* this.

"Okay." Sirius took a deep breath, then accepted the box from Draco and opened it. His handsome face fell open at the sight. "Oh," he said numbly. "Oh."

Draco could not tell for the life of him if that reaction was good. He looked at the ring together with Sirius, the twin of the other: a large glistening black and opal ring, a band all around of smoothed raw black diamond, some actually transfigured back to its original state from refined, cut diamonds in Walburga's signet earrings. What had been greyhounds were now the setting for molten, whirling lines etched and filled with liquid diamond, around the ring in an elegant impression of intertwining vines.

There had been more than enough diamonds to melt, some of which Draco had the distinct impression he had seen on Aunt Bella in photographs. They were leaves and runes now, and the vines led to the drooping snowdrop at the center of the ring. The flower was a single moonstone, embellished with diamonds and carved into a delicate pronged shape, each petal hanging poised like dragonfly wings.

Draco was lying when he said it was *all* from the Black collection. He hadn't been able to find or transfigure opals or moonstones anywhere close to the size, clarity, and eerie beauty of Periander's dagger. So he'd carefully taken off two of those stones. There were so many moonstones, you didn't miss them. And Draco didn't regret it, seeing the way the bluebell flames caught in them.

"Snowdrops," Sirius breathed, and it was to the credit of Draco's artistry that it was a statement, not a question.

"Yeah." Draco tried not to show any embarrassment. "The stones are all, erm, moonstone and diamond, and then the band is black diamond... unrefined... if you look inside, you'll see it's... Remus's, actually," he finished, once he fished out the ring from the box's central slot, and saw the engraving in etched letters on the inside of the ring: *Beloved of Sirius.* Sirius's had *Beloved of Remus.* Draco had agonized over the inscriptions, before deciding the simple truth was incredible enough.

He wondered if Theo had placed them randomly, or somehow intuited that Sirius would be the one proposing. It was simultaneously impressive and creepy if Theo's quiet intelligence extended that far. But it was not petty details of placement seemingly occupying Sirius. He was staring at the words *Beloved of Remus*, and then he slid the ring on. He held it before him, turning it back and forth, and didn't seem to notice the contrast between the delicate glitter of the ring under blue light, and the larger red bend of the unfaded talon brand beneath, *two* presents from his nephew.

"What do you think?" Draco asked, failing to maintain a pretense of confidence. He'd offer to buy other rings himself if these weren't...

"I'm doing this," Sirius said numbly, turning the snowdrop closer. It looked as if he was watching the play of light through each hanging petal. "I'm actually doing this. I'm asking Remus to marry me. I always thought, if we ever got married... that James would be up there with us. James and Lily and... and Peter..." His voice choked, and he lowered his hand, failing to force himself to his usual pose these days of casual, swaggering confidence. "I thought Remus would think I had murdered all three of them until the day he and I both died..."

"Uncle Sirius," Draco said gently, rubbing his shoulder. "You know..."

"I don't deserve this," Sirius said suddenly, looking like he wanted to rip the ring from his hand. "It's a *snowdrop*, fucking hell- I've never seen a ring so beautiful- it's *too* beautiful, Frankenstein- you did this for us, but- I don't deserve to have this, when they can't be there to see it... I don't deserve to get everything I ever wanted with them still dead and gone-"

Sirius sounded uncomfortably like Draco. Sirius *had* often said how they were similar. Seeing from the outside now, Draco could understand the pain, of someone you cared about throwing up this ridiculous but earnest barrier of *deserving*. Draco wanted to *give* Sirius the entire world, not because he deserved it but because he loved him. And not just *him*. "What about Remus? What about what he deserves?"

"Better than me," Sirius said instinctively.

Draco grabbed his shoulder hard. "Look at me. *Remus*? He's lost so much he loved, what he *deserves* is to *have* what he loves now. 'Deserve' doesn't have anything to do with love. And what he loves is *you*."

Sirius let out a harsh gasp, shoulders shaking. "Draco, I can't. I love him so much... love him *too* much... of I don't let him go, I'll ruin him..."

"Okay," Draco said coolly. "Stop being a little bitch. You love him, he loves you, everyone knows it, and if you doubt him, you're just letting the Dementors stay in your head, or finally letting that good old Black psychosis come waltzing in the back door. I haven't figured out the tapestry-" In truth, he'd forgotten about that duty. "But I will, and I didn't make rings this romantic for you to be a fucking coward. Now what are you, a prisoner, or a free man?"

"I'm free," Sirius breathed, staring at the snowdrop.

"So what are you going to do with that freedom?"

A slow, shaky smile finally spread over Sirius's face. "I'm going to stop being a fucking coward."

Sirius and Remus had done a good job putting up Christmas decorations. With most of their time not spent for the Order devoted to Grimmauld's renovation, many rooms were borderline unrecognizable in the best way, floors redone in gleaming modern hard wood, walls painted in calming Remus-like shades of blue. In the living room before a roaring fireplace, the Christmas tree towered, in a majestic fashion Draco had failed to appreciate before under the circumstances. He did now, giving Remus copious compliments. He had no illusion who had been the impetus and direction here, even if Sirius kept protesting how helpful he'd been.

"Oh, yes, Padfoot, I couldn't have done it without you," Remus said dryly, reaching back to pat him on the leg. When Sirius gave him a suspicious look, Remus gave back an innocent smile.

The Christmas tree was piled underneath already, Draco's presents arrived thanks to Theo. He didn't have anything for Bill or Ginny, but if Ginny expected something from him, she was an even worse judge of his character than her brother Percy.

The plan was to spend Christmas Day here, not the Burrow. Which meant that at the moment, their biggest problem was making additional popcorn-and-cranberry garlands, or namely preventing Ron from eating all of the popcorn for them.

"Oh, Ronald, why am I not surprised to find you *eating*?"

"Hermione?" Ron gasped, cheeks bulging out like a squirrel with kernels he'd defiantly stuffed in en masse. He hastily tried to swallow them all down at once, and Fred had to cast an Anapneo to save his flailing little brother.

Hermione and Luna were standing there in Muggle pea coats, both their lovely faces flushed from the cold, suitcases beside them. "COUSIN! STRIKER!" Draco bellowed, and flung himself to his feet to give them a hug so aggressive they nearly both fell over from it. "My two favorite people in the world have arrived!"

"Hey, Hermione," Harry said as he slid the popcorn bowl away from Ron, tone perhaps a smidge less welcoming than it might have been, had Draco not been so over-the-top in greeting them. "Weren't you two all excited about going skiing?"

"I was," Luna said breathlessly, "But Hermione hates it, she's not athletic at all, and when we heard what had happened to Mr. Weasley, we thought we should be here with Ron and all of you..."

"Are you staying?" Draco said, pressing his face against Luna's shoulder and nuzzling it into the dark blue felt of her coat with manic affection. "Please say you're staying. Christmas! Christmas with Luna and Hermione! It's a Christmas miracle! The best Christmas ever! Luna, you have to have a tour of Grimmauld at Christmas! I can't wait to show you-"

"Ron, how is your father?" Hermione asked politely, and Draco dialed down the glee a notch. Perhaps it was insensitive to declare it *the best Christmas ever* in front of four teenagers with a father in the hospital from eternally bleeding fang wounds. "We've been so worried, please, can we sit with you and help? Tell us..."

They got filled in while the decorating continued. Apparently, Hermione had lied to the Grangers, telling them she'd changed her mind because it was so much pressure to study for OWLs. Luna serenely declared that while her father didn't like the idea of her spending more time than necessary around anywhere dangerous like Grimmauld, he'd have to come drag her back himself, now that she'd made it under false pretenses. Instead, they sent off an owl inviting Mr. Lovegood for Christmas Day.

"We came on the Knight Bus," Hermione told them, as Sirius wandered by singing God Rest Ye, Merry Remuses so loudly, Remus wasted yet more popcorn tossing it at Sirius's head.

Remus was also sternly disapproving of some of Sirius's other decorative innovations, namely the return of the house elf heads to hang on the walls with Father Christmas beards

and hats. But even Hermione seemed to agree that if the elves had to be beheaded and stuffed like this, it would be nice to make them a part of the festivities now, macabre as it was. Luna said a hat like this would be very cute on a living elf, that they would look like Father Christmas's elves, especially Dobby with his huge green eyes, and that reminded Draco. "Did you talk to Dobby about Christmas again?"

Luna sighed, shaking her head. "I saw him at breakfast," she said, "But he didn't want to come back to Grimmauld. He said he'd celebrate his birthday with us all soon anyway..."

Draco was confused, and almost a bit hurt at Dobby's uncharacteristic distantness, before he remembered what happened the last time Dobby had gone to Grimmauld. Then he was just filled with rage towards a very different house elf. "Damn, I should have done worse to Kreacher than I did," he growled.

"What did you do?" Hermione asked, and Ron laughed at Draco's frozen *oh shit* look.

"Nothing!" Draco busied himself transfiguring the furniture temporarily gold and Gryffindor-crimson. That would have to be revenge enough on Kreacher for now.

Harry's poorly hidden jealousy, for Luna and Hermione claiming the lion's share of Draco's attention, was deepened when Remus gave permission for Luna to stay in Draco's room. Though she was a girl, she was his cousin, which seemed good enough for him. Hermione looked jealous too, but once Draco reminded her how Luna hadn't gotten to come and stay with them this summer, she just looked happy for her. Harry did not look so magnanimous.

Even Luna's calming presence was not enough to make Draco sleep well. He'd insisted Luna take the bed, and woke on his mattress on the floor in the middle of the night. He went downstairs, careful not to wake Luna, but found that for once, Harry seemed to be asleep. He should have been happy about that. He confined himself to making himself some peppermint tea, hoping that would help him sleep, and taking it over to sip as he stared at the tree's red and gold fairy lights.

None of it dislodged the fragments of nightmare from his mind, so he went up and cast Alohomora, letting himself into Sirius and Remus's bedroom. He had never been inside before, and found it more small and simple than he would have expected, with Remus's favored hard wood floors and navy walls, dominated by a paintings of ocean landscapes and a large photograph of the two with James and Lily Potter. They were in the large bed with its thick blue velvet covers, snugly cuddled asleep.

"Remus!" Draco hissed, leaning to prod him. "Remus. Professor Lupin!" he tried, and the more formal title did the trick of waking him without alerting Sirius. "Professor Lupin, wake up! I need to talk to you."

"Draco?" he asked, and quickly pulled the blankets higher. It looked like he and Sirius were naked beneath. Good news as far as Draco was concerned. Remus seemed far more likely to say yes to marrying Sirius if Sirius was regularly giving him the business. "What is-"

"Ssh. It's not urgent. Please, just get dressed and meet me in the living room, okay?" Remus nodded, and Draco went down and waited by the tree for him. Remus emerged in his dressing

gown in not much time, rubbing his eyes.

"It's the middle of the night. Tell me nothing terrible has happened-"

"No, no," Draco said quickly, lowering his voice. "I just- I just wanted to talk to you, is all, and I couldn't sleep. I know it's selfish to wake you up, I know it's Christmas Eve, but..."

Remus squeezed his shoulder. "Haven't I always told you, you can come to me whenever you need?"

"It was St. Mungo's," Draco admitted, and watched the lights rather than Remus's face, not wanting to see it reminded of Draco's true nature. "I wandered off and saw... Remus, I saw the Longbottoms. Frank and Alice. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have even been there, let alone..." Draco felt at the bend of his wand in his pocket. "I dreamed about them."

"What did you dream?" was all that Remus said, intelligent eyes trained on him. He had the most professorly air that Draco had ever known, like it was not only natural that Remus had the answer to every problem, but he would be always happy to solve them for you.

"I dreamed that I was the one," Draco forced out, "Casting Crucio on them. I've done it before, I know you hate me doing dark magic but it's true, I know how it feels, and it was the Longbottoms- younger, like in the picture of the Order- and they were on the ground writhing around like puppets with their strings cuts, and they looked so much like Neville, and I was laughing- I was just standing there saying Crucio over and over and *laughing*-"

"Oh, Draco." Remus pulled him into a fierce hug. "Just because of whose wand you carry, you cannot take that guilt upon yourself. *You* would never cast Crucio on a person to try and hurt them. You don't have it in you to torture someone."

Which was a hilarious misreading by Remus, one of his few. "*You* wanted to, didn't you?" Draco whispered. "In Hagrid's hut. When you saw Sirius again, and he was begging you to believe him, and you still thought he was lying. I saw you mouth the word Crucio. I can never miss the look of that word. Never. I know how it feels. It has this special feel on your mouth, like a blade you're sharpening..."

"I've never cast the curse," Remus sighed. "I don't know if I would have been able. But at the moment, yes, I was tempted. I'm ashamed of it now, but at the time, the only thing in my head was that I wanted to hurt him just as bad as... as..." His voice trailed off, and Draco stared at that honest side profile cast into gilded shadow, hating himself for making his burden Remus's.

"As he hurt you?" Draco finished, and Remus nodded. "But you didn't do it. And I did. In that dream," he hastily added. "And a snake in a test my father made me do-" He saw Remus's gaze go dark and sped up more. "I can do it. This wand can. This wand *has*. This past month, I offered for Neville to destroy it, but he wouldn't..."

"Draco," Remus said firmly, shaking his shoulder. "This guilt is not yours to bear. And it *is* good you feel guilt, to the extent it is pain for *others*. It hurts to hurt for other people, but it's a sign you're *human*, to see suffering and find it unbearable. It means you feel strong

connections to other people. Do you understand what I mean?" Draco nodded shakily. "You can't go back and stop what happened to the Longbottoms. All you can do is try to keep something that terrible from happening to anyone else."

"But the wand," Draco whispered, leaning in to be sure only Remus could possibly hear him. Someone else could be up, or Kreacher eavesdropping, and it was already mad to tell even one person. "It felt drawn to the Longbottoms. It pulled me there once I was on their floor, like a tracking spell. Like it still had some kind of connection. What if being near did something to them? What if my wand wants to finish the job-"

"Oh, sweetheart." Remus smoothed Draco's hair from his face. "That's what's keeping you awake?" Draco nodded sheepishly. "You wanted me to tell you that you didn't do something wrong? That you didn't hurt Neville's parents by visiting them?"

"You're going to tell me it's impossible, that it's stupid even to think it..."

Remus gave Draco such a sweet, such an undeserved smile. "No. I've seen enough of magic, and the strange things that happen around that wand, to say it's *impossible.* Do I think it likely? Absolutely not. Draco, generally if something drastic happens with that wand of yours, you know right away. It's not subtle. I can say with near certainty, that if you had done anything to them, there would have been some mark left visibly. Think of Sirius's brand. Did you notice anything like that?"

"No," Draco said, relief flooding his veins. "No, nothing."

"Then you don't need to worry anymore," Remus said, and kissed him on the forehead with more gentleness than Mother had ever done.

"Thank you," was all Draco could get out over the lump in his throat.

They went upstairs to get some sleep before Christmas morning.

Going into Kreacher's small room and seeing a photograph of Aunt Bella was hardly the best beginning to Christmas. But at least Draco managed to pocket the framed picture before anyone else could see. He took it to the corner, cast a hasty Reducto, and Vanished the fragments.

"What can I say?" he told them all by way of explanation. "It's mindless cruelty!"

The Weasleys laughed at the top of their lungs, but Hermione looked reproachful. Luna soon distracted her, though, grabbing onto her back and jumping up and down crowing about presents. The presents had all arrived at the feet of their beds magically, but they had agreed as a household to follow Draco's insistence on Severus's old custom, carrying them down to the foot of the tree again. "This is how we do it in my family," Hermione said happily, "We all open them together," and Draco decided never to mention to Severus that he was practicing a Muggle custom.

Draco hoped Severus was not too lonely back at Hogwarts, and that he had gotten Draco's present for the year. It was a moonstone ritual dagger similar to Draco's own from Periander, obscenely expensive and still not nearly as beautiful or impressive-looking, but Draco had thought Severus deserved one of his own. Draco always felt safer with the thing on him, and with Severus's duties as a spy, he wanted Severus to have every even *illusory* feeling of safety he could.

After an early Christmas dinner, everyone piled together before the fire, with Luna taking the duty of distributing presents to everyone in succession. She always gave Fred and George each other's presents, and once or twice one or two for Bill, but she meant well.

When she gave Draco his present from Severus, he wished for the hundredth time that Severus could have come. But he knew Severus would be happier attending a funeral for Sirius and Remus than Christmas with them. He found a deep orange-red potion he couldn't recognize, with a label on its cloudy, lead-stoppered vial that said *Only open in mortal peril*, a typically cheery message from Severus for Christmas. The other package Severus had included, labeled for Luna, had the same.

"Why would Professor Snape send you a gift?" Ron boggled at Luna, and she preened.

"Well," she said, "Draco's his godson, and I'm his cousin, so that makes me... hmm..."

"His godcousin?" Ginny offered.

"Exactly," Luna beamed, and carefully put both vials aside in her bag. No one could identify them, but they had lots more presents to open. Draco got the twins a book that was much-needed in his opinion, a guide to opening a fiscally stable business, though they booed upon opening it. Hermione's mystery book was a thick illustrated tome called *History of Ministers of Magic*, which made her glow with pride.

"You really meant it when you said you wanted to be Minister of Magic?" Ron asked her.

"She'd better have," Draco said firmly, "Since she'd make the finest one in history."

For Luna, Draco had a pair of earrings ordered by owl from a specialty shop, a pair of small, red-eyed white rabbits who were charmed to leap off their hooks and attack the nearest enemy in the presence of any curses. Initially, they had been on silver hoops, but Draco had them changed custom to gold, given Remus's condition. For Ron, Draco had a book on how to talk to girls, which got hurtled at his head, but Draco thought quite as necessary as the book on business for his brothers. For Sirius and Remus, he had a custom calendar enchanted to show the phases of the moon, spelled to gently remind Remus if he had forgotten his Wolfsbane.

For Mrs. Weasley, he had gone last-minute out into Muggle London, and bought her a kitchen plaque that read, A GOOD HOME MUST BE MADE, NOT BOUGHT. And for Harry, who Draco had been so angry at he hadn't been planning to give a gift at all, he had given his notebook on Occlumency, ink charmed to be permanently visible. Harry took that quietly, but he looked more grateful for the present than even Sirius and Remus for theirs.

"No transfigured jewelry at all this year?" Ron marveled. "Cor, Draco, that's a record. OWLs are doing a number on you too, eh?" Draco exchanged a secretive look with Sirius and just nodded.

From Hermione, Draco received stylish non-magical aviator sunglasses. Luna gave him a set of enchanted nail polishes with various magic effects. Ron gave him a small but iridescent painting of an Antipodean Opaleye, which Draco promised he would hang in his room as soon as possible. He fawned over it until Ginny elbowed Ron, who admitted she had picked it out for him. Mrs. Weasley sniffed and remarked how she wished Charlie could have made it, at which Harry looked distinctly relieved.

From Mrs. Weasley, Draco received his first-ever Weasley jumper, an oversized dark green one with a large silver D on the front. Harry gave him an incredibly expensive-looking set of model dragons, enchanted to begin flapping around when touched, letting off small gusts of bluebell flame. It would have been well-calculated to capture the attention, except for then Sirius and Remus brought out their present from another room. Its distinctive shape meant that there would have been no hiding what it was, even wrapped, and they hadn't even tried. There were just two jumbo metallic ribbons tied to it, one emerald and one silver. It was a Firebolt.

The Weasleys went postal, crowding and getting their hands on it before Draco even could. They were all speaking at once, while their mother tried to coax them back to let Draco have it. Murmurs that filtered out from the redheaded whirlwind like *Has to be worth a fortune* and *Just as nice as Harry's* and *Slytherin just got upgraded*. Luna was jumping up and clapping her hands, but Hermione was looking away. Towards Harry, as it turned out, who was staring at the Firebolt with a look like if he could have with just his eyes, he would have set it on fire.

"It's too much," Draco forced himself to say, though of course he wanted it. He could not bear the thought of actually giving it back now that he had it. He was already imagining the faces of the other Slytherins once he got back with it. But he had to say it. "Sirius, Remus, you can't possibly mean this to be for me... it's too..." He would have said too expensive, but he knew how small a dent this would put in the Black fortune.

"Are you still convinced we're only rooting for one of you in Quidditch?" Remus said warmly, going over and hugging Draco.

Out of the corner of his eye, Draco saw Harry leave the room. No one else seemed to notice but Hermione, who got up right away and followed him.

When it was time to go to St. Mungo's, Harry refused to come down from his room. Ron tried to get Draco to go talk to him. But Hermione gently said she thought Draco would be the last person he wanted to see.

"I don't get it," said Ron. "Why would he be that angry? So Draco will have a bit more of an edge in Quidditch, so what? He had a Nimbus 2001 before, that's not that much worse, and anyway, we've already got playing Slytherin over with..."

"Don't you understand?" Hermione said, glaring at him like he was being purposefully obtuse. "It's not about the broom. It's that it was his first present from his godfather, and..." Sirius, who was doing a poor job of acting like he wasn't trying to listen in, leaned even closer.

"We should go on," Remus called. "Mundungus is outside with Moody and Tonks. Hermione, come with us. Sirius is staying to talk to Harry."

"I am?" Sirius said, and earned a look from Remus. "I mean, of course I am."

They piled into Mundungus Fletcher's Muggle car without Harry and Sirius, and Draco was glad of his experience riding in these before. He would have hated to act the way he did his first time in front of all the others. But he didn't stop Hermione from telling them all the story of Draco's first ever car ride in the 'family beast' that he thought had eaten his luggage. Draco caught Luna looking rather reassured by this narrative, given that she'd taken a solid physical dragging by Draco inside in order to be convinced it was safe. And the 'Draco vs. Muggle London' horror story at least kept Mrs. Weasley from breaking into sobs again over the absence of Percy. As if Draco had needed another reason to keep Percy firmly at the bottom of the Weasley ranking.

St. Mungo's had been bedecked with even more decorations, but it was still a rather dreary place to be on Christmas Day. Thinking of some of the Christmases in the red line, though... there was first year, where he discovered the Langlock over his time travel secret... second, when the trio had tried to use Polyjuice to expose him as the Heir of Slytherin... third, where he'd been cursed by Pansy on Christmas Eve, and dueled Sirius for his life on Christmas Day... and fourth with the Yule Ball, when amidst all the miserable romantic drama, Percy had called him a Death Eater in front of the entire school. Just Harry getting jealous over a broom and having to go to a hospital, that was nothing.

But his brave face did not hold up for long when facing wounds from Nagini. He lasted maybe ten minutes around Mr. Weasley's bloody, venom-infected bandages, Severus's corpse superimposed in his vision, before he had to make his excuses and push his way out. He hissed to Remus that he wanted to visit the Longbottoms again.

He headed down the stairs with no intention of seeing anything remotely as upsetting as that. He wanted nothing more exciting than more hot cocoa, preferably spiced like Severus's. But he ran into people, sending him stumbling into the railing and prompting a stern female voice to complain, "Oh, Neville, you can't be clumsy on the stairs, someone will get *hurt*."

"Neville?" Draco gasped, only to admonish himself for being this surprised. As if he needed to make any wild guesses who Neville and his gran would be here to visit on Christmas Day.

"Draco?" Neville's brown eyes went huge in panic. "Oh, no, Draco, is it really you? Is... Is Harry with you?"

"No. But Ron is. All the Weasleys except Charlie and Percy. And they're with Hermione and-
"

"LUNA?" Neville gulped, earning a chastening look from his gran for the volume. "Is Luna here?"

"Yes," Draco said with a wince of sympathy. Neville grabbed him and pulled him onto the fourth floor landing, then into Spell Damage. His gran followed with a look of blanket disapproval, although it was hard not to feel endeared towards someone with a stuffed vulture on their hat. Now *there* was a lady with some sense of gravitas.

"Is Luna nearby? She can't find out! Come *on*!" Neville kept practically dragging him until they reached the doors to the Janus Thickey Ward. "Please tell me she doesn't know..."

"*He* knows?" Neville's gran asked, tartly judgmental. She clearly knew who Draco was. She had also probably already guessed *how* he knew.

"Yes, we've talked about it, he's been really great," Neville said anxiously.

"I didn't talk to anyone, even Luna," Draco reminded gently. "And I won't. I won't tell anyone I saw you here today."

The kindly, maternal-looking Healer from the last visit came to the door. "Oh! If it isn't Augusta Longbottom!" she exclaimed, greeting Neville's gran like they were old friends. "And Neville! Here to see your parents for Christmas! Oh, that's lovely. And you've brought a friend. Three visitors?"

"No," Draco and Neville's gran, apparently called Augusta, said at the same time. She looked like an Augusta.

"Yes, three," Neville said more loudly, clutching Draco's arm as tightly as first year in the Forbidden Forest.

The Healer led them across the ward, which Draco tried to pretend he was seeing for the first time. He nodded politely at the patients. None of them seemed coherent enough to say anything to give Draco away. Including Neville's parents.

Neville was quick to draw the privacy curtains, looking as terrified to be seen by anyone as anything else. Then it was back to gripping Draco's hand as he faced his two white-haired, ghoulish parents. He had the look of something he had to get over, like a Potions exam. He tended to wish he could bring Draco along to those as well.

Draco was surprised, remembering how Neville had talked about wanting to be in Gryffindor to make his parents proud. But when Augusta left to check in with the Healer, it made more sense. "It's worse every time." Neville stared at them bleakly. Mrs. Longbottom had presented Neville with an empty cup and gum wrapper. It would have seemed touching in an odd way, some small part of her wanting to give her son Christmas presents, if she hadn't also handed Draco some nail clippings.

"I mean, they seem worse every time- not that they can get any worse. And I know I'm supposed to- to *feel* all these things, but it's not like they're really my parents. They're just

these *bodies*, being kept alive artificially. I don't think my parents are in there anymore... but I don't know where they'd be, then. Just- somewhere else..."

Neville took a deep, shuddering breath, like these were words he had never said to anyone before.

Draco squeezed his hand hard. "I can't imagine, Neville. Really. I mean it. I can't even imagine," was all he could say. He couldn't wrap his mind around what this must feel to see even once, let alone your entire life. How had Neville grown up with this and gone on to slay Nagini? How was this the boy who killed the monster whose mere memory had Draco running from Mr. Weasley's side? "You're so strong, Neville," Draco said.

Neville didn't look like he believed it for a second, but at least he seemed to believe that Draco meant it.

"Sometimes," Neville said softly. "I say a prayer for them to speak my name. I'm sure they said it all the time... before, but that's before I can remember. I can't even remember hearing my mother or father recognize me. So I used to pray for them to get better, but it never happened, so I just started praying for my name... I would try and bargain, if I could just know they *knew* me, for a second, that would be enough..."

"Do you want me to say one?" Draco offered, feeling guilty enough despite what Remus said, that if Neville had asked for a blood sacrifice, he would have probably been on board. "A Christmas prayer? So you don't have to this year?"

Neville nodded. Draco let go of his hand and took one of each of the parents' hands, closing his eyes. The only prayer that came to his head, though, was Luna's to the demon goddess Hecate. She would have been better at this than him.

"Please," Draco improvised, which seemed the proper way to begin a prayer. "If there is a power in the world that could change this, let it change. These are Neville's parents, and he loves them, and he wants... he wants very much to meet them. So please... if they're not in there, if they've really gone somewhere else, then put them back. If they're dead, then *raise* the dead."

Draco felt a pulse of energy, pure magic at the unholy words. He opened his eyes and saw his hand had gone into his pocket. It was holding the talon wand. He didn't stop praying. "They've been dead long enough, in this- this living death, so please, if there is a power in the world, if I have any power- please, let this be undone. Don't let my aunt win. They were... they were good Aurors, smart and strong and true, and their son needs them... he's such a good son, he's such a good person- and whatever he says, he's brave- he's braver than anyone I've ever known to face *this*... he's staring it in the eye, this living death, and he's asking, and I'm asking with him, raise the dead..."

Draco pulled his wand out of his pocket without noticing, fingertips feeling at the dried blood on the bend. Neville said his name. He ignored him, staring at the darkness spreading between his hands, from the wand to every one of his fingertips, and into the hands of the Longbottoms once he touched them both. "Raise the dead..." he prayed, a strange light feeling coming into his head, a feeling like the dam on his magic was being let loose, but

with none of the angry force of usual spells... like something was coming out of his wand, in that growing flickering mass of shadow, the inkiness that seemed it would color everything in pitch, a darkness as indelible as soot on snow.

"Raise the dead..." Draco prayed, and the darkness all went away into Neville's parents. And into the shadow, as every light in the room went out.

The talon shape glowed across Frank and Alice Longbottom's foreheads, hot and bright as the talon brand, but in Patronus-blue light. Then both of them fell backwards on the bed, and began to shake.

"What's going on?" Augusta Longbottom's voice demanded, from far away.

"Draco," Neville whispered. "What did you *do*..."

The big brown eyes of both parents turned black, not just irises but the eyes entire. They turned a brilliant Patronus color, then faded to brown eyes again. Except there was a difference in the eyes that blinked at them like they were waking. The vacancy was gone.

The lights of the ward flickered on.

"Hello?" Alice Longbottom asked tentatively. "Where... where am I?" She pulled her hand back and turned to her husband, hands going to his aged face, then his whitened hair. "Frank? Oh, Frank, look at you, what have they *done* to you..."

"Alice?" Frank Longbottom breathed, "Alice, there you are, you're alright," and wrapped his arms tightly around his wife. As Augusta Longbottom and the healer ripped open the curtains, Neville sat very still and watched his parents hug each other for the first time.

Finally, Frank let go of his wife, looking past the two frozen teenage boys. "Mother?" he breathed. Augusta stepped forward and wrapped him in a hug so fierce, her vulture hat fell off.

"What happened?" the Healer gasped. "The lights went out... oh, Alice, you're *talking*!" She looked old enough to have been caring for them a long time, perhaps since they had first come here. And she had clearly never expected *these* patients to be the ones to get better, let alone all at once.

"Was I not talking?" Alice asked uncertainly. "I feel so weak... Frank, his hair's gone white, he looks so thin, so pale... the Death Eaters, they caught us... they kept torturing us, that woman- the *Lestrange* woman, she was laughing- oh no, *Neville*! Augusta, is Neville alright? He's safe at home, isn't he?"

Augusta nodded as she disentangled herself from her son, who was now doing a double-take at his wife. "Alice, your hair is white as well. You look terrible," Frank said, and bizarrely, of all things, Alice gave a little sniff, drawing her sunken shoulders up in her hospital gown.

"Well," she said huffily, "*That's* nice. Augusta, if your son is quite done insulting his wife, perhaps you could let Albus know that we've been rescued..."

"We're at St. Mungo's, aren't we?" Frank asked warily. "Merlin, my legs feel like they aren't going to work. Augusta, you aren't saying anything about Neville. Is the baby alright? Please, tell us the baby's alright- the Death Eaters didn't get to him, did they?"

"No." Augusta's hands clasped hard to her mouth, looking ready to hyperventilate. "Oh, Merlin, this is a miracle. I can't believe it, I'm going to faint..." She seized her grandson around the waist and buried her face in his shoulder, her earlier bluster silenced.

Draco took a deep breath. "Um, hello, Mr. Longbottom, Mrs. Longbottom..."

They shook their heads. "Call us Frank and Alice," Alice said, "Everyone does. You..." She did a double-take. "You look very familiar. You aren't any relation to Lucius Malfoy, are you?"

Neville began to laugh, halting and wondering, as his grandmother clung to him. Then the Healer pulled the grandmother away, to ask what had changed so quickly, whether they should start contacting extended family... Draco also heard her warning that this moment of lucidity could be fleeting. But she said that such *absolute* lucidity tended in her experience to indicate a real recovery.

"Neville," Draco breathed. There were tears coming down Neville's face, his laughs halfway to sobs, his eyes so wide on his parents, it was like he couldn't grasp what he saw before him. "Neville, it's okay, don't cry. I don't know what happened, but look, it's your *parents*, Neville, look, everything's going to be alright..."

"Neville?" Alice said tentatively, and tapped Neville on the shoulder. "Um, excuse me, young man. Did he just call you Neville? You... you look just like Frank at that age..."

"Fifth-year," Neville said, voice shaking. "I'm a fifth-year. I'm... I'm a Gryffindor."

"Alice," Draco said, not sure if he should be inserting himself, but there were no rules for a situation like this. He didn't know if there had ever *been* a situation like this, certainly not recently at St. Mungo's from the Healer's reaction. "Frank, you've both been asleep for a long time. It's Christmas-"

"That was weeks away!" Frank exclaimed, and Neville let out another shaky laugh. Frank straightened up, arm still around his wife's shoulder protectively. Even after all those years, he still had the posture of an Auror. So, in a moment, did she.

Soon, they would likely be asking for their wands back.

"No, it's Christmas in *1995*. Listen," Draco said carefully, "You're not going to believe me, but after what happened with the Death Eaters, you've been asleep for over fourteen years. And this... this brave young man right here beside me... Frank, Alice, this is your son Neville."

Their faces went rigid with shock, ghoulish emptiness given way to an expressiveness which made them look far less aged, white hair incongruous with their youthful faces.

"Neville?" Frank breathed in wonder, and slowly, Alice reached out. Neville took her hand, and she stared at his, feeling each of his fingers.

"Yes," she said slowly. "Yes, this is my baby's hand. This is my baby. This is our boy, Frank."

"Fourteen years," Frank echoed, disbelieving. "No wonder we look so different... Neville, is that really you? You're... you'd be fifteen now, wouldn't you? A fifth-year, you said?"

"A Gryffindor," Alice marveled, lighting up, and squeezed her son's hand. "Oh, Neville, I can't believe you've gotten so big. You're so handsome! And you said you're a Gryffindor?"

"Yes," Neville said, and broke out into messy, wracking sobs as his mother hugged him, and then his father too. "Yes, Mum, I'm a Gryffindor."

A Voice in Azkaban

Chapter Notes

Hi all! It's totally okay to make fanart for the series, I love to see it! And memes! The memes were so awesome ^^

Anyway, enjoy! <3

Playlist

There wasn't much talking in that hospital room, only the same things repeated, as the bare minimum began to sink in for the Longbottoms: the torture they had suffered at the hands of the Death Eaters had driven them into a state of madness, where their bodies were alive but their minds were detached from reality, and finally, almost fifteen years later, they had recovered.

Finally, Augusta asked Draco who he had come with, and told him to go tell them, tell them to tell Albus, to tell *everyone*. Draco nodded and ran.

He found, somehow, that his friends were still visiting Mr. Weasley as if nothing had changed, when the impossible had happened a floor below them.

"Oh, hey," Ron said casually when he saw Draco walk up. He was sitting on the floor, playing Exploding Snap with the others. Tonks and Moody were standing in a nearby corner, whispering conspiratorially. "It's just Bill and Remus in there with Mum. She's still having a go at him for trying out this Muggle remedy that didn't go well. Luna and Hermione have gone to look for the tea room. You want in on the next hand?"

"No thanks," Draco said numbly, and went over to Tonks and Moody. "Um, excuse me..." He barely could summon up the nerve to interrupt them.

He had to wait until Ginny poked her head up and yelled, "Hey, you two, Draco wants to talk to you," before they turned and noticed him.

"What is it, lad?" Moody frowned, his good eye immediately seeming to hone in on the difference in Draco's demeanor since he last saw him.

Draco took a deep breath. "You're not going to believe me," he said, slowly and clearly so only they could hear. "But I promise I'm telling the truth. I was downstairs in Spell Damage, in the closed ward with Neville Longbottom. Sir, his parents have woken up."

"Oh my God," Tonks breathed, hands flying to her mouth. "What do you mean, woken up-Draco, they're speaking? They're not completely out of it any longer?"

"That's impossible," Moody said, but there was a hopefulness in his eyes unlike Draco had ever seen there, as if some of the damage that had hammered him down into the twitchy, cynical soldier he was now had just been lifted from him. "Frank and Alice? They're talking? Right now?"

"Yes," Draco said urgently, "I spoke to them. Listen, Neville's gran told me to tell you. She said for you to tell Dumbledore, and anyone else you want. The Longbottoms... they're acting like it was yesterday they were fighting the Death Eaters. They..." Draco swallowed hard. "I just introduced Neville to them. They were hugging him when I left."

"Oh my God," Harry breathed, having approached without them noticing. "Neville's parents, they're not mad any longer?"

"I don't know," Draco said, "But it seems it. Harry, you knew about them?"

"I saw it in Dumbledore's Pensieve," Harry said softly, "In the trial of your aunt. Draco, this is... oh my god, you said Neville's here? He must be..."

"What's going on with Neville?" Luna asked, poking her head in. She and Hermione were back, arms laden with tea and sweets. Draco barked out a shell-shocked laugh.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

Dumbledore did not believe Draco. That much was clear, as Draco repeated the same story about the Longbottoms over and over again, and Dumbledore kept asking questions about the smallest details. It was infuriating. Draco didn't understand why Harry had been so depressed by Dumbledore ignoring him this year. If it were Draco, he would just have been relieved. He got fed up pretty quickly, offering to take Veritaserum, even though it was illegal for minors. Upon that reminder, he offered to put the experience in a Pensieve for Dumbledore to watch, or to allow Dumbledore to try and use Legilimency on him.

The last offer made Dumbledore look thoughtful. "That is the other matter I wished to discuss with you, Mr. Malfoy," he began, and Draco had a feeling he knew where this was going.

He was proved right, as he was forced to leave after literal hours of questioning, and pull Harry aside to make an offer he didn't want to make. "Listen, it wasn't my idea," Draco explained, "But Dumbledore really thinks that after what happened with Mr. Weasley and Nagini, you should start getting lessons in Occlumency again. And I'll do it again, if it's the fate of the bloody wizarding world on the line like Dumbledore made it sound."

Draco might have tried to argue, but even after all these years in the red line, it was hard to make his policy with Dumbledore anything other than *Get out of the same room with him as quick as humanly possible.* He had to drink a draught of peace before and after, and mentally thanked Theo for having sent them, albeit at the bottom of his luggage where it took a while

to find. If this meant Theo could guess at Draco's anxiety issues now, well, he'd clearly learned a great deal about Sirius and Remus as well. And there were far worse things Theo could know. Theo had sent him all his notebooks, and by all appearances, the invisible ink had remained invisible in the transit.

It was hard to get Harry alone, given all of the curiosity coming Draco's way from the other students. But the one person under the roof of Grimmauld who didn't want to talk to Draco was the one Draco had to pin down. Eventually he managed it, dragging Harry up to his room by the hand, in a fashion that had made Ron smirk after them baselessly.

"Are you sure we have to?" Harry asked weakly, not looking in his direction. "I mean, I don't know if we were getting anywhere, and you're so busy... and I don't know if it makes sense for *you* to give me lessons-"

"Listen," Draco said heavily, "If you understood the depths of the favor I am paying you, without even demanding anything in return, you would be inundating me with gratitude." Harry had taken a seat on Draco's bed, in itself a distracting sight, but Draco was trying to stay on topic here, even if Harry was just staring at the Antipodean Opaleye that Luna had hung up on the wall in his absence. "It's not a question of whether you're getting lessons, it's with whom."

"What?" Harry frowned, still staring at his hands. His side profile under the bluebell flames was so lovely it made it hard to talk fluidly. Draco had almost accidentally bit his tongue at the start of the conversation. "Isn't it better I keep getting these visions, since if I hadn't seen Mr. Weasley was in danger when I did, maybe he-"

"Hey, hey," Draco interrupted, "Take that up with the grown-ups, Harry. I'm just the messenger." *The messenger of whatever the hell it takes to keep Dumbledore's suspicions off me a little longer.* "Not up to me. It's either me or Severus, take your pick."

That did earn him Harry's gaze, albeit in abject panic. "Your *godfather*?" he gasped. "He'd be in my head? *Him*? Oh God*,* no!"

"So," Draco drawled, "Are you ready to offer me all manner of thanks now, teacher's pet?"

A flush spread low on Harry's cheeks, and traveled quickly down his collarbones, where the ridges showed above the ragged collar of his red jumper. But Draco was not staring, nor was he checking out this taciturn version of Harry. Especially in a Weasley jumper and some of his rattiest-looking jeans. "I'd rather practice with you than Snape, obviously- I *think*-" Harry shot Draco a nervous glance through his eyelashes, a flash of sudden furtive attention that made Draco's heart go a little faster. "No, if *Snape* knew-"

"Knew what?" Draco asked indulgently, and Harry's hands curled to fists.

"I just don't want to learn Occlumency," Harry complained. "We already tried a lot, I'm terrible at it anyway- and why do I have to have *anyone* in my head?"

"You have someone in your head already," Draco offered logically. "It's just a question of whether you want it to be me or the Dark Lord rummaging around up there."

"Okay," Harry said slowly, as if trying to talk himself into it. "I get that. I'd rather have you in my head than Voldemort." Then he ruined it by adding, "I mean, I *guess*."

Aesthetic appreciation was superseded by irritation at that point. "Listen, I don't care how cross you are at me that your godfather gave me a Firebolt too-" Harry looked surprised at that, as if his reservations hadn't actually stemmed from that quarter, but Draco plowed on. "I'm not going to argue with you, because it's not my choice. If you drag your feet, I'll tell Hermione, and you can argue it with *her*-"

"Okay, okay, we can start up Occlumency again," Harry said, throwing up his hands. "Back at school? Monday nights? Just please don't send Hermione after me-"

It was good to see Draco was not the only poor soul making decisions under that eternal fear. "It's settled, then," he said crisply. "Read the notebook I gave you, and maybe you'll be a little less hopeless by the next time I'm inside your head."

Harry chewed on his lower lip again. "Oh my *god*," he said again quietly, "You're going to be inside my head again. *You.* Oh my god."

"Something wrong with that, Harry?" Draco drawled. "Something changed since last time? And here I thought you told me everything. Guess there must be something going on up there now that you *really* don't want me to see-"

"I need to help, er, Ron with something," Harry lied obviously, and made a break for it.

Even after agreeing, Harry kept giving Draco a wide berth around Grimmauld. It served Hermione well, at least, as she had declared it irresponsible at best to allow this miracle with the Longbottoms to pass without making an earnest attempt to understand it. And so, for the first time in her life, Hermione went through the Black library, along with Draco's growing personal collection, and began to wholeheartedly research dark magic.

"Isn't it fascinating?" Luna said happily. "Dark magic is so *misunderstood*."

Other than Draco, only the girls were interested in this extracurricular bit of study. The Weasleys, save Ginny, seemed inclined to take it as a Christmas miracle and leave it at that. And Draco had shooed Ginny away harshly enough that she seemed disinclined to intrude on the Rat Thieves again. He could only imagine her response to Luna's oblivious enthusiasm, given the face Hermione made, before mastering herself and looking back down at her book. Hermione had always been so uncharacteristically gentle to Luna, among a hundred other things he adored about her. It made him feel even worse to burden her with something this foreign to her nature.

"We'll see the Longbottoms on New Year's Eve," Hermione said, and the reminder took Draco's attention away even worse than it had been already, daydreaming embarrassingly about Harry. "The goal is to have *some* kind of explanation for them, other than whose wand Draco's is- oh, Frankenstein, don't roll your *eyes* at me, you don't look like your godfather when you try and do it that long, even if you *think* you do-"

"Shouldn't they just be happy their family is reunited?" Luna said mistily. "Neville's written me, he sounds so happy and so confused."

The Longbottoms were still at St. Mungo's, kept in isolation, as they were subjected to a barrage of tests. By all accounts, those tests had them keep coming up almost suspiciously fine, both magically and psychologically, with no lingering traces of dark magic or physical residue in the Janus Thickey Ward either. Neville and his gran had been visiting daily, but from the letter Neville had written Luna, they were still confining themselves by Healer orders to only basics in information. The plan, tentatively, was to have the Longbottoms come by for the large dinner Sirius was throwing on New Year's Eve- "in the Longbottoms' honor", not at all with ulterior motives. Hopefully by then, they would have been brought up to speed enough to keep it from being too overwhelming for them. Draco was more nervous than he should have been, to come face to face with them and Neville again, like he had done something *bad* to them.

Maybe it was the fact that his deeds compelled him, for the first time, to hand over to Hermione *Moste Dark Blood Rituals of the Demon Goddess Hecate*. Researching dark magic for this, while Remus pored over texts on wand science and Mind Healing, seemed only logical, given how the aftermath of the prayer had *looked* so dark.

"What *is* this?" Hermione exclaimed, tossing the book away in repulsion after only a few pages. "I know the Black family practices dark magic, but this is... this is just beyond the pale! I've never *seen* such an evil book!"

Draco and Luna exchanged glances, while Luna surreptitiously slid the book away from Hermione. "Oh, yes, evil," Luna said airily. "A very evil book. I'll have to examine it thoroughly."

The Christmas decorations were still up, with a few more added the morning of New Year's Eve. These included a banner Luna and Ron made that read, 1996: THE FINAL FRONTIER, with lots of wacky glittering stars and space decorations. Draco was going to ban Hermione from letting Luna consume any more Muggle pop culture. She already looked irredeemable, snuggled in her Nightmare on Elm Street hoodie, though Draco wasn't in any position to criticize.

After all, Harry had accomplished very little that day other than staring at Draco in a new hoodie of his own, a Christmas present to himself: SLYTHERIN SEEKER, it read on front, with a distinctive silver snake design over the word KINGSNAKES CAPTAIN, and on the back, simply MALFOY. It was probably mostly jealousy, in this case, given that Harry heard Draco tell Ron he had sent out the Slytherin team matching hoodies, printed with the players' respective names and positions. "Even Nott?" Harry asked several times, as if he expected Draco to have left Theo out of the team hoodies solely in deference to Famous Harry Potter's feelings.

Most people were more with-it than Harry, though. The focus was making sure the Longbottoms' first foray out of St. Mungo's in fourteen years went well. What had been meant to be a small gathering swelled bit by bit, beginning with all the Weasleys save Arthur,

Charlie, and Percy expected, and Mrs. Weasley whipping up a supper to rival her Christmas dinner. That made six, eleven with the other residents of Grimmauld already there- twelve with Luna's father, who would be eating with them and then taking Luna home for the rest of the break- fifteen with Moody, Tonks, and Shacklebolt- seventeen with McGonagall and Dumbledore RSVPing later- evening out to a cool twenty-one with the Longbottoms included. Yes, it was good that Ginny and Hermione went in to help Mrs. Weasley in the kitchen, though Hermione's attempts were apparently counterproductive enough to get her quickly banished from it.

Draco's biggest concern, though, was not the Longbottoms, selfish as that may be. He cornered Sirius in him and Remus's room, about an hour before guests were due to arrive, to ask, "Do you have it on you?"

"Have what on me?" Sirius asked, and Draco rolled his eyes at him, giving him his long Severus-inspired eye-roll, however Hermione unfairly maligned it.

"You know what," Draco said, and with a groan, Sirius reached into his robes pocket and withdrew the lacquered ring box.

"I always have it on me," he murmured. "I just haven't ever gotten up the nerve..."

"Are you going to do it tonight?" Draco demanded. "You were supposed to on Christmas-"

Sirius looked rather ill at the thought, and began to pace once he pocketed the box again. "Mr. Weasley was hurt, it would hardly be the time- he's still in the hospital, so it still isn't- and really, I know I said New Year's, Draco, but this party is supposed to be for the Longbottoms, not-"

"You're always going to find excuses to put it off if you want," Draco cut in curtly. "We're in a war, in case you haven't noticed. Which also means our every day could be numbered, so you'd better get a move on! Honestly, can you think of a better time than tonight, with all these people important to us here? You'll never have a better chance, and soon we might all be too dead to-"

"Okay, okay," Sirius said, and stopped his pacing to go over and inspect his reflection.

"Looking dapper, dear," the mirror informed him, and Sirius smiled weakly.

"No, you don't, you look like shit," Draco said, and Sirius turned to glare incredulously.

"Says the boy in a hoodie for a party?" Sirius said mutinously.

"I'm not the host," Draco said, "Proposing to the love of his life, am I? And I'm planning to change before the party anyway. Now get off those robes, and get on one of those snazzy Muggle outfits I know you've got left over from your young days. Come on, let's pick one, and make sure he'll be swept off his feet. By the way, this permastubble thing you've gotten going, really, either shave it or make it a proper groomed beard like before, Uncle Sirius, you're really letting yourself down here-"

"You know," Sirius said, with a twitch of his lip, "I'm beginning to understand why, the first time we met, I cursed you so many times."

Once Draco left, Sirius was not slow to emerge in a newly polished guise, thick dark hair brushed to gleaming waves loose around his strikingly handsome face, stubble gone. He looked ready to steal hearts in an old tailored three-piece Muggle suit, which fit him perfectly with a few charms on Draco's part. Draco tried not to think about how he'd learned all those clothing charms from Mother, and just basked in the sight of the change he had made to the red line.

The suit rendered Sirius beyond gorgeous, in Remus's favorite color, navy blue. Draco also put on a tailored Muggle suit in a similar color, to match the Ravenclaw-blue party dress he had bought for Luna, which she insisted on wearing tonight.

The three of them were dressed for so transparently different an occasion than everyone else, it shouldn't have been hard to see they were up to something. But people took it as one of Draco's pureblood affectations, which he'd simply bullied his cousins into. Suspicion was not yet raised, with everyone's minds on Frank and Alice.

Remus, who had been helping levitate chairs into the dining room to accommodate for so many more guests, let the chair clatter to the ground at the sight of Sirius, only just missing a yowling George's foot. Draco took that as a very good sign.

They'd told the other guests to arrive half an hour after the Longbottoms, to give them time to adjust before overwhelming them with more people. The Floo had long since been declared unsafe, so they arrived chauffeured from St. Mungo's by a jumpy Mundungus. Dumbledore and McGonagall would be taking a Portkey out of Hogwarts, and Dumbledore had sent a Portkey of his own making to Xenophilius Lovegood as well. Thus it was just twelve people standing there awaiting them at six that night, not that twelve was a reassuringly small number. Then Mrs. Weasley barked at all of them, sending the children out of the way before retreating to the kitchen, telling Sirius and Remus that as the hosts, they should welcome the Longbottoms to their house alone at first.

Perhaps that was a good call on her part, as the Longbottoms looked overwhelmed already by the time they made it to the living room. Granted, Neville looked the most worried of the four, but still, it was such a bizarre, unprecedented situation that poor family found themselves in. They'd had their miracle, and now in the wake of it, they had to figure out how to live in a world that had raced on and left them behind. Frank and Alice Longbottom were like time travelers, their old minds cast into their bodies years and years later. Instead of thrown to the past like Draco with his privileged knowledge, they were cast out into an unforgiving future, unprepared and ignorant.

Still, they both had a certain relaxed dignity already to their bearing that made Draco intuit well for their prospects. Luna whispered how much they looked like Neville, from their position hidden sneakily inside the cupboard. Neville's parents certainly did more now that they had both dyed their hair dark brown. They looked almost their ages again, the sunken look gone, and their faces already a bit less gaunt, even less wrinkled. They were good-

looking now, in fact, with Frank a dead ringer for the man Neville would grow into that would slay Nagini. If Sirius had not turned out so magnificently, the Longbottoms would have been the toast of the party.

"Sirius," Frank said, shaking his hand heartily, albeit with a bit of awkwardness to his bearing. "You look so well. They've told us you were falsely accused, that it was Peter... we're so sorry. We never would have thought it was *Wormtail*."

Alice, who had descended on Remus hugging him like another long-lost son, poked her head up and went over to hug Sirius. "I could never believe it, you know- we'd only just heard, when..." Her voice trailed off at the memory of what they had suffered, and Neville hurried to their side.

"The Healers said to try not to dwell on it, Mum," he said anxiously. He seemed as protective of them as he had been despairing before, something in his bearing like he was the parent. Augusta nodded approvingly at the advice.

"Of course," Alice said, forcing a smile. She had a naturally very pretty smile, even strained. "Well, I can't say how happy we were to hear that it's turned out alright for the two of you... that you're here living together... is it together?" Remus nodded with a small smile. Alice let out a girlish squeal, and with a more genuine grin, raced forward and hugged Remus again.

They weren't just in the Order together, Draco realized with a pang, *They were friends. Especially her and Remus, but all of them. And Sirius thought they'd gone mad and left reality never getting to know he was innocent.*

"There's going to be a lot of people coming to dinner tonight," Remus warned her. "Pretty much everyone in the Order wanted to come, but we've limited it to just a few. There will be some of Neville's classmates here, you can meet them."

"We've already met Draco Malfoy," Frank said, with no distrust in his voice for that surname. "Neville told us what he did for us. We'd love the chance to thank him properly."

"Draco?" Remus called.

"Shit," Draco hissed, and shot a panicked look at Luna. She grabbed his shoulder, Draco lost his balance, and together, they fell out of the cupboard at Remus's feet.

"Um," Draco said weakly. "Hi, yeah, it's me, Draco Malfoy? You called?"

"Draco," Remus said warningly. "Were you and your cousin *eavesdropping*? After you were expressly told to give the Longbottoms some space when they first arrived-"

"That's why we were hiding in the cupboard," Luna said brightly. "To give them space. Hello, everyone."

"Luna! You fell!" Neville exclaimed, and ran over and helped her up, while Draco had to pick himself up, dusting himself off with a sheepish grin. "Luna, you look... you look really nice,"

Neville said, flushing as she straightened the sleeveless blue dress that Draco had bought her for the occasion.

She did indeed look far more sophisticated than usual, her long hair in a braid crown, and some of the blue and white diamond Black jewelry on that had survived the ring-making. Draco had given her twin bracelets, a diamond chain belt, and sparkling chandelier earrings, though she'd refused to wear any necklace but the Sleeping Beauty turquoise necklace that Draco had made her years ago.

Seeing Draco get fancied up, Luna had insisted on doing the same, perhaps suspecting what Sirius was about given that she'd been the one to make him the initial suggestion. But Draco hadn't accounted for the effect that might have on poor Neville. The bloke had enough to worry about already.

Now, if Frank and Alice had eyes, they had just learned that their son had a girl he massively fancied, before they even got introduced to said girl. Draco saw Alice shoot a mischievous grin at Frank, which just the two of them shared, before they left Neville to try to compose himself with Luna, and crossed the room to Draco.

"Draco," Alice said warmly. "We've been told that you don't know how you helped us. Neville said you prayed. Thank you just the same. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts."

Frank nodded, and cast a look back over towards Neville. "He's been told not to say much about the present, but we can tell he looks up to you. Remus called that girl... your cousin?" He had an Auror's gruff tone gathering information. "Is she a Malfoy? Are she and Neville-"

"Neville *wishes*," Draco said bluntly, no point sugarcoating it now. Alice gave an exasperated but already fond sigh, shaking her head with eyes only for her flushing, excited son.

"Neville," Draco called, "Don't you have someone to introduce to your parents?"

"Right!" Neville yelped. "Sorry. Er, Luna..." Luna followed him over to his parents, beaming from ear to ear. "Mum, Dad, you've already met Draco. And this is his cousin, er, my friend, Luna Lovegood... she's a Ravenclaw in the year below us, her dad's the editor of the Quibbler-"

"Father's coming tonight," Luna said happily, and Neville nearly jumped out of his skin.

"What?" Neville cried, panicked, and seemed instinctively to look down at his clothes. Poor Neville had yet another stressor added, as he was going to have to go through that whole *meeting the girlfriend's family* ordeal, without even having the actual girlfriend to make it worth the suffering. "Oh, Luna, you should have said..." Neville seemed to be wishing he had dressed up in something better than plain black robes.

"Ah, Xenophilius," Augusta said knowledgeably. "A good man, if somewhat off-beat. He interviewed me once about the teleological implications of taxidermy."

"You might as well see all the children at this rate," Remus sighed, and made a funnel with his hands around his mouth before calling, "Everyone, you can come meet the Longbottoms!"

Augusta went over and straightened her son's collar. Then Mrs. Weasley rushed out of the kitchen. "Frank!" she exclaimed. "Alice!" She eyed them like she'd seen a ghost, before hurriedly exchanging embraces. And then, to the unending humiliation of the twins, she made all of her children line up by age to be introduced, even Bill.

"Here's my eldest, Bill, he's a Curse-Breaker," she said proudly. "Our next-oldest, Charlie, is a dragontamer in Romania, he couldn't make it all the way back." A shadow crossed her eyes. "Then there's Percy. He works for the Ministry, he couldn't be here either. Here's the twins, Fred and George, they're... they're twins. Here's Ron, he was made prefect this year! And here's our youngest Ginny, she's only a fourth-year, but she's quite the accomplished witch already... and you must be *so* excited to meet Harry!"

Harry raised a hand weakly. He hardly looked like the most famous person in the room, in jeans and a plain gray hoodie, with a slump to his shoulders and circles under his eyes like he hadn't been sleeping. Frank and Alice stopped dead when they saw him anyway.

"You look just like James," Alice blurted. "Oh, I'm sorry, my dear, I don't mean to be insensitive... it's just so good to see you..." Draco knew the loss of Lily and James had been very, very fresh for them before they had 'gone under', so to speak.

"No," Harry said with a bittersweet smile. "No, I like hearing I look like my parents."

"You have your mother's eyes," Frank observed, "But I'm sure you've heard that before."

"Yes, sir," Harry said, nodding respectfully. "And this is our friend Hermione..."

"Oh, Neville's told us about Hermione," Alice exclaimed, going over to shake Hermione's hand excitedly. "He said she helps him a great deal with coursework... says she's the brightest in their year, that she's going to be Minister of Magic someday. That's your ambition, dear?" Hermione nodded proudly.

Though Draco might have just been imagining it, he thought he saw a truly uncharacteristic sourness at seeing someone else praised cross Luna's face.

"Well," Frank said, with heartfelt sincerity, "Neville, what fine friends you have. We already couldn't have been prouder of the man our son is becoming, and-"

"Dad!" Neville wailed, "*Stop*!" with a sound like this was already a regular occurrence. But Draco could see him fighting back a smile.

Dinner proved an unqualified success, as both the food and the company were sublime. Harry was rather quiet, as he tended to be these days, but Frank and Alice seemed up to the challenge of being around so many people. Many tearful reunions followed, with McGonagall nearly losing her composure at the sight of her old students restored, and having to leave the room, while Dumbledore drew them aside for a quiet word alone before leading them back to the table. Frank and Alice knew Moody and Shacklebolt, fellow Aurors who greeted them with stoic but heartfelt amazement. The Longbottoms also seemed pleased to

meet Tonks and Xenophilius Lovegood for the first time, who were similarly very positive towards them. Xenophilius was not so sanguine with Draco, whom he seemed to regard as having virtually kidnapped his daughter to place her in danger, but you couldn't have everything.

Mrs. Weasley made a toast to Frank and Alice, using that same word that everyone seemed to be throwing around to explain something unexplainable: miracle. Then Frank and Alice were given the chance to speak, and both did so with admirable succinctness and clarity.

Alice spoke first, of her gratefulness to all of them for keeping up the fight with them out of commission. She finished on a relatively somber note, squeezing her husband's hand,

"If there is to be a war again- and it seems there is- as soon as we're ready, Frank and I want to be right back out there, fighting with you all."

Frank repeated what she had said, and added more lightly, "We have to offer our particular thanks to all of you, for your help in looking after our incredible son Neville, when we are unable." He smiled especially at his mother with this. Augusta gave a grave nod, but then could not suppress a smile. Draco was pleased to see that vulture on her hat looking more sprightly than ever.

Finally, Sirius rose to give a speech of his own, and Draco and Luna both tensed, thinking it might be it then and there. But it turned out to just be a toast of his own to the Order of the Phoenix, calling all the students there honorary members- much to the clear fuming of Mrs. Weasley- and pledging his support as a member of the Order to the Longbottoms, with whatever they needed to get back to their warrior selves. Alice smiled so widely it looked like it hurt, when Sirius spoke the word *warrior* for them.

After dinner ended, Kreacher shuffled in reluctantly to help with the clean-up, as did some of the students. Draco was shooed out of the kitchen after breaking two dishes, but in his defense, it was his first attempt to wash any dishes, by hand or magic, in his natural life. But Harry said he'd had to wash the dishes all the time for his Muggles, and he got sent out for breaking one as well soon after Draco. It seemed that not incompetence but distraction was the culprit there.

It felt a bit claustrophobic, with so many people all on the same floor, so Draco took Harry by the arm and led him up the stairs, just far enough around the bend towards the second-floor landing that they could speak without being watched from below. Harry sat there on the stairs with him, with a look on his face like wherever he was taken, it was more or less than the same to him.

Draco's first thought was to commiserate with him over Dumbledore once again ignoring him, more understandable given the Longbottoms' miraculous recovery demanding the attention. Then he thought Harry might have caught wind what Sirius was planning, and feel bitter that Sirius had included Draco in it and not him- though if Harry wanted to learn how to transfigure jewelry and magical tapestries, he could feel free to try and take Draco's role in proceedings. But no, there was something pricking at the back of Draco's mind, some thought that had kept almost getting formed when he looked at Harry and then Frank and Alice...

"This is what you saw in the Mirror of Erised," Draco realized suddenly, making sure to speak quietly. "Parents lost in the war, magically restored to their son's side, all his family around him again. It's just that it's happening for someone else." *And I'm the one who made it happen.*

"I'm a terrible person," Harry muttered, and pulled the hood of his gray sweatshirt up, casting his face into shadow.

"It's okay to be jealous," Draco coaxed him, only for Harry to whirl on him, hood doing nothing to hide the sudden fire in his green eyes.

"Is it okay to be jealous *all the time*?" Harry hissed. "Do you think that feels good? And being angry all the time too? Because I *am*, and I know it's stupid, and I hate it! I don't want to *be* like this! I want to be happy for Neville! For everyone! For you and Theodore bloody Nott! And- I know you'll say there's nothing there, I just-" His hands had gone to fists on his lap, and they trembled. "There's just so many things I want that I'm never going to get. And I- I suppose that- I suppose I just need to *stop* wanting them."

Draco didn't know what to say. He didn't know what Harry was really trying to say. It just sounded like- in the wake of the distance between them since the start of November- whatever ground Harry had made, on the depression that had oppressed him that summer, seemed to have been lost, and then some. It was funny that Draco had used to think himself such a jealous person, and then Ron the jealous one, and Harry still the perfect one who had everything. He thought of taking Harry's hand, his usual go-to move comforting anyone these days, but with Harry nowadays, it was an even shot whether he would just pull away.

"I wish I was so different," Harry breathed, eyes holding wistfully on Draco's face as he spoke. "I wish... I wish that when the year changes, I could just be someone else-"

"I don't want you to be someone else," Draco blurted, but Harry's eyes didn't seem to believe him.

"Harry? Draco?" Hermione's voice called from below. "Will you come down here? Sirius was asking for the two of you."

Harry looked at him, startled, when Draco's melancholy expression went to a manic grin, pumping his fist to himself and hissing "Yes!" before running down the stairs. Harry followed more slowly, only to the back of the living room, while Draco ran right over to the tree, sitting with Neville and Luna underneath it. "Harry!" Draco called, and Harry came over looking confused, pulling Hermione and Ron with him.

Together, the six of them sat down under the tree where the presents had been, and watched Sirius pull Remus to the center of the room, in front of the decorations and the roaring fire, all the guests in the living room with their glasses of cocoa or something stronger. Neville's parents were on the couch beside Shacklebolt, Tonks, and Moody, the latter two of whom looked three sheets to the wind already.

At least Sirius seemed mostly sober, one of Draco's firmest instructions for tonight. The other had been to plan what he was going to say. Sirius claimed he had, though he'd refused to tell Draco beforehand.

Draco had to grab Hermione's hand to calm himself. She looked at him with cluelessness. Luna, though, leaned her head on his shoulder, visibly trying to suppress her anxiety.

"Moony," Sirius said, leading him by the hand to the center of the room. Remus looked at where they were stood, a slow, analytical three-sixty survey of the room that did not seem to put any suspicion on his face even still. They had done a good job keeping this secret. Hopefully that would make this a wonderful surprise for Remus, and not a life-ruining calamity. "Stand here, okay? I've got something to say. Will you promise to listen until I'm done?"

"Okay," Remus said, crossing his arms guardedly. "I promise. I'll listen to the end, Padfoot."

Sirius took both his hands and pulled his arms uncrossed, holding his hands hanging between them. A world of panic flashed through his eyes and then left them, as he drew himself tall and kept hold of the hands of the man he loved.

"I wanted to say," he began, taking a deep breath, "That- well, to start, that you look lovely tonight, but you know that-" Remus gave him a look like he was babbling already. "You know I always think you look lovely, Moony, but I'm getting off track, aren't I? It's not my fault, you've got these eyes, and that voice- right, that's what I was going to say- your voice, Remus. I wanted to say that- well, I've told everyone that in Azkaban, what kept me alive was the thought of revenge. But that's not true. Not entirely. It was also the thought that if I died, I would never get to hear your voice again."

Remus looked bewildered now, but he hadn't let go of Sirius's hands. This unexpected show of emotion seemed to have caught almost everyone off-guard, any murmurs going silent the moment the word Azkaban was spoken.

"I thought about it all the time. It was practically a mantra, when the worst thoughts would come. I'd play it over and over, like trying and trying to cast a spell. I never told you because it's pathetic, but I don't care who knows now- what kept me sane was the memory of your voice. I could never forget who I was, not even if I wanted to, when I still remembered the way you said my name. Sometimes I'd imagine I heard it. A lot of the times, you were annoyed about something or other I'd done, which, fair enough."

There were a few laughs, but mostly, everyone just listened.

"Sometimes, though, I could remember making you laugh. I *love* making you laugh," Sirius declared, deep dark eyes fixing on Remus with shamelessly violent devotion. "And when I can, the rest just- goes away. Everything I've done wrong. All the wasted years. Everyone who should be here in this room but isn't- everyone who I let down- when I can make you *laugh*, Remus, it's like we're thirteen again. All those times I'd be whispering things in your ear in Transfiguration, and you'd be trying not to blush, or crack up too hard... or accidentally turn your teapot to a tarantula instead of a tortoise, just because I told you how much I liked your eyes..." He shot a sly look at McGonagall, who already had tears in her eyes,

handkerchief pressed to her face, as the fourth person in the room who knew where this was going. "I still do, for the record, Remus. I really, really like your eyes."

Sirius took another deep breath, at risk of losing his composure. Draco worried he would get overwrought, but he seemed to steel himself against it then. "I don't want to die," Sirius said steadily, "Before telling you- before telling anyone who'll listen- that you're the best person I've ever known. You're the most brilliant and sweet and kind and brave and beautiful and true person in the whole world, and I adore you, Remus Lupin. I'm mad about you, madder than I ever was, and I know..."

Sirius's voice broke, and he pulled Remus's hands to his mouth and gave them each a hard kiss, eyes senselessly adoring above them. Remus's face had frozen in complete shock. Draco couldn't read it.

"I know how much better you deserve than me," Sirius went on, and Remus shook his head. "I've known that since were eleven years old, before I could even work out why you were the quietest and shyest boy in the Gryffindor dorm, and yet your voice was always, always the loudest one in my head.

"It's selfish of me to ask this," Sirius went on, with the question almost in the air now. "Yes, you've made me a better man. But anyone would be a better person for having known you, that doesn't make me special. Being near you makes everyone better. You're so calm and good and it makes everyone feel like they're home- when you're in a room, there isn't any shadow, not with you in it- I don't want to go back to shadows, I want to be with you, I want to be *home*. I want to adore you, I want to *worship* you, I want to hold you for every fucking day for the rest of my life, I don't want to wake up a single morning until I die without hearing your voice again. Because that's home.

"This place- Grimmauld," Sirius breathed, gesturing at the tree, the lights, the breathless onlookers, and the dark bones of the house behind it, "This house, this family, growing up, it never felt like home, not once, I never felt safe, I never felt wanted or loved, but Remus, you've made it home for me. And I want to give you that too. I want to give you everything you deserve and more. I want..." Sirius closed his eyes, then opened them and gave that rakish, gorgeous, still-arrogant smile that lit up his dark eyes. He got down on one knee and pulled Theo's opal box from his pocket. "I want to give you this. Remus John Lupin, will you marry me?"

Sirius opened the box, and the room filled with gasps. Draco hoped that was not for the subpar quality of the ring's craftsmanship. If nothing else, the moonstone from the dagger was beautiful, almost as beautiful as the unconditional devotion in Sirius's eyes. The moonstone of the snowdrop glowed in the dim light, brighter than any of the lights on the tree behind Sirius, the smallest but most brilliant spark of promise.

"I..." Remus's hands had flown to his mouth. He looked truly shocked, unable to process what was happening. "This... Sirius, you really want..."

"Yes, Remus," Sirius said intently, not moving from his knees. "Yes, I really want to marry you." He tilted his head, giving a sheepish smile. "Like, really. *Really*, really. Really, really, really-"

"Okay, okay, I get it," Remus gasped, taking a shuddering breath. Then he stared down with Sirius with such a despairing look on his face, Draco felt the gut-punch of the conviction Remus was about to say no. But instead, Remus breathed out, "Sirius, I can't lose you. Not you. Not you too. I can't... if we do this, promise me, promise me you won't leave me too. *Promise* me."

"I can't promise that," Sirius said, "You know that, I'm sorry, but I love you, Remus, and if I die I'll die loving you," and pressed his face to Remus's hand, kissing it. "I love you so much."

"Alright," Remus said, voice cracking. "Yes. Yes, Sirius Black, you horrible bastard, yes, I will marry you!"

"Yes!" Sirius screamed, and leaped to his feet and pulled Remus into a hard kiss. "YES! Bloody hell! Oh my God, Remus! You mean it? You mean it?"

"Yes, Sirius," Remus said, rolling his eyes indulgently. When Sirius stared at him with his big dark eyes pleading, he gave him another kiss, then pulled away, seeming the only one of the two to remember they weren't alone. "Now hold it together, Padfoot, you hear me?"

"Yes," Sirius said, and kissed Remus's hand again. He didn't seem to be able to stop kissing Remus. The whole room felt alive with Sirius's happiness, sparkling bright and golden. And Remus's smile, a soft secret one to himself, was just as ecstatic, if not more.

"Yes, Remus, whatever you say," Sirius swore, and hugged Remus tightly from the side, letting Remus's hand so he could nuzzle his face into Remus's shoulder.

"Sirius? Are you forgetting something?" Remus prompted. "The ring?"

"Oh! Right!" Sirius exclaimed. "Here!" He took the ring from the box and pushed it onto Remus's waiting ring finger. Then he reached into his pocket, pulled out its twin, and pushed it onto his own hand. Draco could see Remus's eyes go wide in wonder at the sight of the matching snowdrop ring on Sirius's finger.

"Oh, hell," Remus breathed. "You've even gotten a matching one for yourself? You *are* serious about this." Sirius nodded, then turned to finally notice their audience as well.

"YES!" he yelled to them again, exultant, and raised up his hand to show them. Remus bit his lip, grinning, and held up his own hand.

Dumbledore stood up and began firmly to applaud. At once, the room burst into applause behind him. Alice Longbottom shrieked uncontrollably and ran to Remus, throwing her arms around him in incoherent excitement before her husband laughingly peeled her off, offering both men before them earnest congratulations, saying that just that had been worth coming back to the world of the living to see.

McGonagall was dabbing her eyes, Mrs. Weasley was holding onto Bill's shoulder and sobbing, and Hermione soon buried her face in Draco's shoulder as well. Luna was practically bouncing where she sat in excitement, while Ron looked shocked, Neville was

watching the proposal with an admiring wistful look, and Harry was just smiling. He was looking over at Sirius and Remus with untainted adoration in his green eyes, like after witnessing something so beautiful, all of the anger and jealousy clogging up his heart had been washed away.

For the moment.

Sirius and Remus were pulled about the room to accept more congratulations. As Luna shrieked at the top of her lungs and pulled Sirius into a hug that pushed him face-first into a number of the most antique House Black ornaments, his dangling hand went past Harry's face. "Wait," Harry said suddenly. "Wait, let me see the ring."

"Go ahead," Sirius said, which prompted others to pull Remus over too.

"It's a snowdrop," Remus told them, in an elated voice that left no doubt Draco had done a good job. Then again, from how Remus was looking over at Sirius, he might have said yes even if Sirius had proposed with a ring in the shape of the bloody Dark Mark. "It is, isn't it, Sirius? He always used to always give me snowdrops he gathered on Valentine's Day..."

"Draco," Harry said, and made Sirius turn his hand to show all the sides of it off. "You made this, didn't you?"

"You did?" Remus marveled. He seemed to seize upon this as an excuse to come over and glom onto Sirius's side again, for once as clingy as Sirius. "Really, Draco? You actually made these rings for us? I can't believe it, they're so poetic and lovely..."

"Oh, don't worry," Draco said loftily. "It was a lot of work, but I am expecting a healthy commission fee. From the sounds of it, my design hit the mark. So, Uncle Sirius, perhaps I should be requesting a *bonus* fee..."

Remus laughed out loud and pulled Draco into a full-hearted hug, kissing his hair before letting him go and kissing Sirius on the mouth. They were at that for a minute, until Fred and George made hooting noises that made Remus pull back blushing.

"Professor McGonagall!" Draco exclaimed. "Professor McGonagall, come here! Professor McGonagall helped me! I kept it a secret, but I had to ask her help. She helped me with the transfiguration, a lot, with the research and the spells. I couldn't have managed it at all without her."

"Thank you, Minerva," Remus said with a smile. "Thank you so much. You *were* always my favorite colleague at Hogwarts."

He pulled her into a hug while she sniffled, and Frank Longbottom asked in the background, "Oh, did Remus use to teach at Hogwarts?"

"Yes, Dad," Neville said, looking embarrassed, but then proud to add, "He's the best Defense Against the Dark Arts professor we've ever had."

"Successfully defended against the Dark Arts," Draco drawled, "But not against the advances of my grim-faced uncle. Well, my condolences, Uncle Remus, you had a good run there, but in the end, you've succumbed to the persistence of- hey! Ow! I made you that ring, stop poking me with it!"

"None of your jokes, young man," Sirius said jovially, and stopped the poking to admire the sight of his ring beside Remus's once more. They seemed to share the same beam of light.

"Well," Dumbledore said, rising from his seat. "I think this calls for another toast." He raised his wand, and prismatic glass flutes floated into everyone's hands, refilling with champagne for the adults and sparkling cider for the students. "To Sirius and Remus!"

"SIRIUS AND REMUS!"

1996

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Luna left with her father before midnight, along with all the other guests but Tonks. With Tonks, there, though, the party was only beginning, as she, Bill, Sirius, and Remus sat by the fire drinking. The Weasleys and Hermione were in the near vicinity, playing a prediction game for the year called 108 Sins, based off the Japanese tradition. Tonks had bought it for everyone, but seemed more interested in drinking, so the students had inherited all 108 of the small enchanted bells.

Draco had played it before the start of 1996 the first time, and it had foretold nothing but good for him. After how this coming year had turned out in the blue loop, he had no interest in the game anymore.

He'd thought Hermione would abhor anything Divination-related, but she seemed too giddy with a sugar-high and life high to complain. In fact, when Draco refused to take his turn, she demanded he go find Harry, so at least *Harry* could get his 108 predictions before midnight.

That proved a harder task than one might think. He found Kreacher skulking around the stairs, but he said he hadn't seen him, in a surly tone that meant he might have just been speaking to him, for how much he wanted to help. Draco looked just about everywhere before he thought to look the one place he wouldn't have thought of: his own room.

Harry was stretched across Draco's bed, bathed in the blue glow, shoes off. Asleep.

Draco was left standing in the door. It fell shut behind him with a slam, but not loud enough, it seemed, to wake Harry up. Harry's glasses were on Draco's bedside table, and Draco couldn't resist picking them up, staring at them. Then he took Harry's discarded jumper from the table beside them, and brought it to his face, unable to resist breathing in the Amortentia scent from the cheap fabric. He put it back quickly, at the thought of Harry waking and seeing him doing something so creepy. And even if he didn't, what was the point in torturing himself?

1995 was turning to 1996, the sound of the countdown beginning from 60 downstairs, along with the mechanical voice reciting the numbers from the watch Harry had given Draco. Soon there would be fireworks, whose loudness Draco remembered from the new year before last under this roof. It had been the night that he had promised to help prove Sirius's innocence. Now the Prisoner of Azkaban was blissfully engaged to his bloody soulmate, and yet Draco was no different. He still had no earthly idea ever what to do about Harry Potter.

He's beautiful was not a new thought, although its coexistence with the most basic thought units of *He loves me* and *He wants me* in association rendered it less academic. Everything was academic, though, in the red line. He had gotten his chance, the one life everyone else got, and if Harry knew who he had been that first time, Draco imagined that he'd-

No, he didn't have to imagine, he *knew*. He remembered that back turning after giving him his wand and walking away from him, the day he saw the mirror. Maybe some part of Draco had never forgiven Harry for the pity in his eyes then.

Maybe some part of Draco had never stopped wanting to crush him for it.

Maybe he had already, not just by erasing his victory and making him relive all this suffering, but by binding him to someone like Draco. Maybe this had been his retribution, as terrible in truth as the revenge that Sirius had bided his time imagining behind the walls of Azkaban. Draco had come right out of Azkaban and set about ruining Harry's life, taking away his triumph and love and replacing it with this hopeless blind attachment to a Malfoy-shaped phantom.

He didn't know what steps had led them down the fatal road to his obsession being shared. He had tried to keep his distance, at least at first, and then just tried to get over Harry. All he had found himself doing was orbiting him the same, not even trying in earnest to escape the pull. Draco was orbiting him now, while the world began anew below, because after seeing what Sirius and Remus had- when he looked at Harry like this, he wanted...

I want to be the only thing on his mind. I want that to be why he can't have Occlumency with me, because he can't get me out of his head. I want him to be dreaming of me right now, and wake up with my name on his lips. I want him to love me as much as Sirius loves Remus. And I want Harry to want *me. To want me bad enough that I'm the only one on his mind at night when his hands are on himself. I want him to think of me when he does it, the way I always think of him- always-*

1996 was the year Father went to prison, when Aunt Bella got out of it, when Draco learned at her hands, of Occlumency and pain. It was when he seduced Theo, when he was given the Dark Mark, when he proposed the vanishing cabinet and received his mission and began his work towards the fall of Hogwarts. Draco would be sixteen this year, the age when his life had fallen apart all at once, and then more and more, until it *really* fell apart. Harry would be sixteen too this year, and he would lose his godfather if Draco couldn't change things enough. If it didn't turn out that the only real change Draco had made in Sirius's fate had just been making him a little happier before he went-

Even if Draco saved Sirius, he wouldn't deserve Harry. Deserve had to be taken out of the equation, as with Sirius and Remus, or everything shut down. Draco would never not be a thief, who looked at a hero in his bed, and somehow was foolish enough to think something so good could be touched by something so evil and emerge unsullied. Foolish enough to ignore the blue loop, where Harry loved Ginny, as if loving Draco Malfoy instead wasn't a punishment Harry should never, ever have had to bear. Draco was meant to give him away to Ginny, but-

I don't want to hand him over to her or anyone else. I want it to be me. I'm the only person he's ever kissed and I want it to stay that way. I don't want him to even think *of it. I want to kiss him so hard, so much, that after, no matter what he tries, he'll never kiss anyone without thinking of my lips-*

"3... 2... 1..." the voice from Draco's watch recited. Draco shut off the countdown as cheers exploded from downstairs, and then there was the rumbling of fireworks outside. His room didn't have windows, but the impression of intermittent brightness filtered through with the booms, diffused flashes of lightning over the face of Harry waking.

"Happy New Year!"

Draco could hear people shouting downstairs from very, very far away, while the fireworks went off like bombs, and Harry sat up and saw Draco there.

"Draco?" Harry said, peeling his eyes open and rubbing his eyes. "Did I fall asleep?"

"Happy 1996."

"Oh, God, I missed midnight? Hermione is going to kill me-"

"She sent me to get you a while ago, but there hasn't been a search party- took me a while to find you. So I reckon we're alright. This is the last place I thought to look..."

"I just wanted somewhere quiet," Harry said defensively, as if he had forgotten he was a wizard. "Your room's the highest and furthest. I just wanted to lie down and not be disturbed. I didn't mean to fall asleep-" He broke off, laughing shakily as the room vibrated, bluebell flames trembling in the air. "It was the quietest *before*..."

"And now it's the closest to the fireworks."

Harry peered up guiltily. "Do you want me to go?"

Draco shook his head. "I don't feel like going down to a room full of people excited for the new year. Don't get me wrong, I'm excited for Sirius and Remus. But not for myself."

"Me either," Harry said. Draco finally obeyed the silent pleading of Harry's gaze, and sat down on the bed beside him. He tried not to notice how Harry's hair was mussed from sleeping, or how he still hadn't put his glasses back on. His face was free to kiss unimpeded, not that any decent person's mind would immediately jump there. But he *was* on Draco's bed...

"Quite a pair we make," Draco intoned, and Harry laughed.

Sirius had talked about how much he loved making Remus laugh. Draco could feel that now, the unreasonable giddiness that sent bubbling up in him, however reluctant he had been to let go of his self-castigating wallowing.

"At least I get you to myself for once." Harry spoke the words shamelessly, as if it was self-evident he would scrape and beg for every scrap of Draco's attention he could get. "That

counts as a good start to the year."

"Did you get it? When you saw the rings? Why I couldn't tell you who they were for?" At least that was one conflict that should be resolved now.

"I can't believe how stupid I was," Harry groaned, though his face changed when Draco lay down on the bed beside him. He did lie like this with Hermione and Luna all the time, but it felt different being this close to Harry, especially a version of him so tousled and warm and sleepily repentant. "I never would have guessed. Did Sirius ask you not to say?"

"Yeah." Draco poked Harry's shoulder. "Don't be bitter I knew before you. He just needed me to help with the Black family tapestry- he wants to put Remus on it... you know I'm not really trying to take him from you. They can care about both of us, it doesn't have to be a competition..."

"It's not like I can make anything like those rings." Harry blinked sleep away as he repositioned his chin, moving his face closer so he could see Draco even without his glasses. He was so cute it made Draco's chest hurt. "I get it. I just... I wish I could have *you* all to myself like this more often. I know we'll have Occlumency lessons, but... I'm so dumb. I wish this was like some fairytale where I could lock you in a room like this with me, lock you in a tower for a while, and then I'd be the only one you saw, so you'd have to pay attention to me..."

"What the fuck, Harry?" A bizarre, flattered warmth spread through Draco's chest. "What kind of a dream were you just having?"

"No, it's just something dumb," Harry said placidly. "My aunt used to tell my cousin stories like that all the time when we were little- Dudley didn't like them, but I did- stories about knights and princes rescuing captives like princesses from towers they were locked in, like Rapunzel... they'd be guarded by a dragon, you know, in a lot of them... this is like a fairytale room up here, it's like the room at the top of the tower where you wait for the prince..."

"Oh, let me guess," Draco intoned. "You were always the prince, coming in saving the day."

"Yeah, maybe," Harry shrugged. "I felt more like the captive at first, like Cinderella, locked away doing all the chores for a family that hated me. But I wanted to save myself, and then I would imagine saving every other child who was locked away like I was."

"Slaying the dragon?" Draco prompted. Harry laughed, a rumbling sound that made Draco's selfish thoughts come back with full force.

"And now that I'm older," Harry whispered, "All I want is to lock the *dragon* in the tower. Just for a little while."

"Do you think that's feasible?" Draco said dryly, trying not to take a thrill in this nonsensical conversation. "Think you could do it? Keep a dragon locked away for just you?"

"Yeah, I could do the binding at least. *You* taught me spells for that."

"Oh, in your dueling lessons? We ran through all that really quickly. You probably don't even remember half of those lessons anymore-"

"I remember binding spells," Harry said confidently, and Draco rolled his eyes. "I do. What, do you need proof?"

"Put your magic where your mouth is," Draco smirked, and Harry's hand touched his chest, planting there and pushing him on his back. Draco's jacket, vest, and tie were all downstairs, button-down half-untucked. Harry's fingertips pressed into bare skin at the top, in a motion that should only end naturally with Harry's hand sliding along Draco's throat.

But Harry was just guiding Draco back so he could cast the spell more easily. "Manibipiscatus!" That *had* seemed to be his favorite. Just as then, Draco's wrists were thrown over his head and pinned by invisible hands.

The rest of his body could move, but he was left exposed nonetheless, bound to the bed by the purr of Harry's magic down his arms. When Harry cast that spell, magic poured along Draco's skin with a world of intent behind the incantation, intent for Draco's body now that it was caught...

"See?" Harry said, leaning over with his breath hot on Draco's face. Draco tested his wrists, but Harry's magic had them bound as tight as any real chains, a tug on his whole body from there downwards. He arched, trying to use his weight to buck back, and all it did was just brush his chest against Harry's before he fell back in defeat.

"See, you can't get away, can you, dragon?" Harry said softly, and ran his thumb over the exposed skin of Draco's wrists. "I could lock you up anywhere I wanted. Make you spend this whole year just with me... not Nott or Charlie or Cedric or *anyone*- just me, and then maybe you'd..."

"Harry," Draco said, voice hitching, and Harry turned instantly from reverie to guilt.

"Oh, God," Harry breathed, raising his wand again, "I'll let you go," and Draco glared.

"Don't let me go," he ordered, as if Harry was the one powerless. He arched his back the other way, trying to sit up enough to crane his neck and follow Harry's movement. "Come here."

Harry leaned back over and Draco felt his forehead brush his. "I'm here," Harry whispered, and Draco's whole body was alive with selfishness, with the same possessiveness Harry was joking about, and worse. *Stay,* he willed Harry. *Don't ever look at anyone else like this, not for the rest of your life, don't you dare...*

"Guess I've got the dragon caught. What should I do with him now?"

"Whatever you want," Draco heard himself say, soft and breathy, and Harry's eyes went huge. "You can do anything." Harry gasped, hand falling on the pillow beside Draco's hair to steady himself, and his lips brushed over Draco's cheek, a maddening tease. "You don't have to," Draco whispered, "You don't *ever* have to let me go," and Harry stared at his lips.

"Don't tease me," Harry said with a sudden bleakness, drawing his face back. "It's cruel, Draco- I won't ever be able to get it out of my head-"

"What's in your mind right now?" Draco breathed, and Harry shut his eyes hard.

"When we kissed under the mistletoe," Harry sighed out, and Draco smiled. "If I just hadn't pulled your hair, then maybe..."

"Harry," Draco hissed, "You're such an *idiot*." Harry's eyes opened, lips fallen into a bit of a pout at the word. "I can't not think of that day either, alright? So go ahead. *Pull* my hair if you like."

Harry's right hand went into Draco's hair, strands of hair flowing between each finger as he stroked reverently. Then his grip tightened at the nape of Draco's neck, pulling his head back so their eyes were level, baring Draco's neck to examination. Draco's parted lips went wider in shock before they pursed again, tingling in anticipation. He moaned at that tug, at the reckless command in it. The heat that pulsed between his legs was something like the sharpness of Harry's magic in his scent, in its weight and hold on him, but needier, a throbbing of the need for touch coming over him there that would have been shameful, if Harry's face had not looked like he himself wanted so badly, he was getting lost in it-

Harry tugged Draco's hair again, wave of it curling around his hand as he kept hold. Draco moaned, his mind scattering, every reason not to being tugged out and only leaving the whimpering begging voice behind saying *Kiss me kiss me kiss me kiss me*, and beneath it the one that said *Use me*, and then just *Tell me what to do.* "You like my hair, don't you," Draco said, not very creatively, but Harry's eyes ran over with enough predatory intent to make the words resonate.

"I love it," Harry said, "I love it so much, I can always find you in any room by this hair," fingers combing greedily through. "And I- I always wanna touch it. Can I pull it again?"

"Yeah," Draco said softly. "Yeah, you can. Like the first time you kissed me..."

Harry tugged, and looked displeased when a more prepared Draco didn't make a sound in response. His hand went higher on Draco's scalp, looping Draco's fine hair around his wrist, before tugging back again. Draco whined then, squirming beneath him. The blood in his body felt like if Harry didn't stop touching him this instant, the strength of Harry would transfigure it all to liquid Fiendfyre. As if he wasn't burning already- as if there was anything left of him to burn-

"I want to touch you *everywhere*," Harry admitted, letting out the words in a racking gasp, and Draco didn't know why he just didn't.

"Want to touch my mouth?" Draco breathed, licking his lips, and Harry nodded. Draco turned his head and pressed a kiss to the back of Harry's hand, nuzzling it until it fell out of his hair and he could kiss at the fingertips, sucking worshipfully right at the ends of two of those long rough fingers between his lips. Draco had closed his eyes, but he pried them open. When his gaze met Harry's, the look in Harry's eyes made him suck those fingers into his mouth, index

and middle finger gliding in over his tongue before his head bobbed back, up and down. Finally, they escaped with a wet pop.

Harry took a deep, unsteady breath, pupils dilated to the edges of his green irises, the heavy-lidded look of those thick-lashed eyes like a spark ready to come alight. Just one last touch for the dragon to breathe fire-

"I want to kiss you again so bad," Harry said all in a rush, voice ashamed but inevitable.

"Then what are you waiting for?" Draco whispered.

Harry kissed him and it was like the release of the guards in Draco against his own magic, the dam loosed and a world of possibilities let out unchecked, danger and yet life, vital and painful and perfect on the tongue. Harry tasted like sparkling cider and frustration, kiss harsher and sharper than under the mistletoe, laid out in bed with Harry on top of him, sucking down on his bottom lip. Draco arched as he strained into the kiss, pinned wrists his leverage to lift his back off the bed and press up his mouth in whining demand.

Harry kissed hard enough to sting, all teeth. Draco sucked back at his mouth, keeping his eyes open to stare right at those green ones. Then Harry's weight fell on his, Harry abandoning himself to the kiss completely, like throwing the last coherent thought out of either of their minds. All Draco could do was shut his eyes. Without Harry's glasses, their noses brushed together, every bit of contact more addictive, harder to talk himself out of, harder not to keep tasting.

Harry's hands slid back through Draco's his hair, cupping his head with a grip only deepening as he poured himself into the kiss, as wholeheartedly as he did most everything he loved. Passion was a taste in itself, a sting that throbbed over Draco's wet plundered mouth and reverberated lower in him, making his back arch again.

"Draco," Harry gasped into his mouth. "God, Draco, I love kissing you," and Draco laughed against his mouth, baring his teeth. Harry's tongue slid along them, before the tip brushed the tip of Draco's tongue. Draco almost saw stars at that slightest of touches.

"You're going to..." Draco panted, "Have to learn to kiss... properly, you great blunderbus." Harry laughed shakily, sucking on Draco's lower lip again. He seemed to have learned that Draco liked that, or he was in the process of learning it, tugging out the lip between his before returning to press kiss after kiss smacking against Draco's waiting mouth. Each one was like a lavishing of affection too deeply felt for him to keep holding back, another declaration restrained no longer.

"Slow down, Harry... Merlin, you kiss like a Dementor..."

Harry made a sullen noise, pulling back, and Draco strained up, pulling at earnest at the magic on his wrists for the first time to chase Harry's mouth. "What, Draco?" Harry breathed. "What are you trying to kiss me for, then?"

"Someone has to show you," Draco hissed, "How it's done properly," and Harry laughed, elation spreading across his handsome face like the sun just come out from a storm, like one

of the fireworks still going off in the distance, sending vibrations through the bed and both of their bodies, keeping them together with light like fireworks in Harry's perfect eyes.

"Show me, then," Harry said challengingly. Draco surged up, straining enough to nearly pull something in his back, and dragged Harry's face back down to his just using his teeth, clamping on to Harry's mouth and not letting it go, the suction a wet pop as it ended. Then Draco licked up into Harry's mouth more slowly, whole mouth swollen and wet now, so sensitive and raw it needed to constantly be touched to be bearable.

Each kiss subtracted rather than added. The more he got the more he wanted, less and less satisfied until Harry took control of the kiss again, resuming his clumsy forceful pressure downwards. He was pulling unrepentantly at Draco's hair now, using it to drag Draco's face up into each individual kiss. The feeling of Draco's wrists bound above his head made him feel deliriously helpless to it, like Harry could kiss him forever if he wanted and there was nothing he could do to stop him. Harry's weight felt like heaven on top of him, like pressure on his lungs was the thing he had needed to breathe properly again, the strong muscular length of his legs entwining with Draco's as they began to make out in earnest. Harry did prove a quick study, mimicking the speed and then the motion of Draco's mouth on his. "You're so good at this," Harry kept saying incoherently, or, "I love kissing you," and then finally, "God, Draco, you're gorgeous."

He pulled back to say the last one, staring down at Draco's face. Draco's face felt hot, probably just as flushed and sweaty as Harry's. Merlin, those pretty pink lips of Harry's had never looked darker than now, the distinct imprint of Draco's teeth left in them. "I don't get how you can be so gorgeous," Harry whispered, "It's like you're not even *real*," and pressed a vicious kiss to Draco's exposed throat, before his lips rose greedily to Draco's mouth again, driving in the words with a series of emphatic kisses, "Gorgeous, Draco, you're so gorgeous... so bloody impossible... you're so evil, you drive me *mad*-"

Draco wanted nothing more than to keep doing it. He'd toed off his shoes, and ran his sock foot over the side of Harry's calf, hooking it and making Harry sigh. "And I don't get," Draco laughed back, "Why you haven't given up by now," and Harry made a bemused snort.

"I don't know, Draco," he panted, "If this is you trying to tell me to give up, I don't know..." He kissed Draco for a greedy moment in the middle of his own words. "This," he breathed, pressing a kiss to each of Draco's cheeks, before sighing the last words into Draco's ear. "This probably isn't the best way to get me to give up..."

"Well," Draco groaned, trying to turn his head away from something simply too good, earlobe so sensitive he didn't even want it touched. Harry's mouth fell beneath instead, sucking at a patch of skin below. Draco's lower body pulsed so much at the feeling, he was afraid he was going to get off without meaning to, just at the friction through their clothes and the way Harry kissed his skin. "It was meant to show us that... that we have no... no chemistry, that it wouldn't feel good if we ever... tried anything, so we'd know there was, ah, nothing but friendship between us- mmm..."

Harry kissed across his cheek and cut off his words at the lips. "So give *up* on me," Draco gasped into Harry's lips. Harry kissed him until they were both breathing too hard to keep going, heat of their bodies stifling between them. Harry was looking more and more like a

debauched angel, with his huge want-darkened green eyes in that heart-stopping face, and that thick beautiful dark hair haloed in the pale blue light.

"Give *up* already," Draco whined, and Harry laughed and kissed at his pout.

"Do you really want me to?" he whispered, and slowly, Draco shook his head.

He expected more kisses then, but-

"Footsteps," Harry said suddenly, and Draco took way too long to remember what that word meant, let alone connect it with the thudding sounds growing louder. Harry jumped off him, sitting up and throwing his discarded hoodie over his lap in a gesture that indicated he was having very much the same difficulties as Draco at the moment. "Draco, come on, someone's coming-"

"Let my wrists go, genius!" Draco hissed, and Harry hastily undid the Manibipiscatus spell. Draco sat up, finger-combing his hair, afraid what they'd been doing would be painfully obvious regardless. He untucked his shirt, letting it hang in front, and concentrated on making his problem disappear. But he couldn't stop licking at his swollen lips, lingering over the feel of Harry left on them...

"Hey, mate! Happy New Year!" Ron said, coming in looking jazzed off the new year, Butterbeer, and maybe something stronger. He seemed less likely to notice anything than he was to get an O on his Potions OWL. He didn't blink at their disheveled state. "Have you seen Harry- oh, hey, Harry, Happy New Year! Come down here, you've got to play this bell game..."

The first thing Draco whispered to Harry when he cornered him on the stairs the next morning was, "You didn't tell anyone, did you? Don't tell anyone yet."

Harry blinked at him, rubbing his eyes. "Good morning to you too..."

"Harry, did you? Did you tell Ron, or- morning, Ron!" Draco called brightly, forcing a smile as a bleary-eyed Ron descended the stairs past them towards the siren smell of breakfast.

"Morning," Ron slurred, and nearly fell the last two steps, before Hermione rushed past and steadied him on the way down, calling something ominous about what would happen to the next one of her friends to engage in any more *underage drinking nonsense.* But Draco was too nervous to hear anyone but Harry's voice.

"Did you tell anyone?" Draco demanded, and Harry frowned, raking a hand through his hair. He hardly looked to have combed it since last night. It stuck up in all sorts of places, and yet the sight of him still had made Draco's mouth go dry, and no amount of swallowing and licking his lips seemed to get the sandpaper feeling off them. "Harry, if you did, you have to tell me-"

"No," Harry said, as if it was a stupid question. "There's not been time-"

"So you're going to?" Draco prodded. "Listen, Harry, we need to talk about this before anyone else can know. We'll talk later, I promise, just please, promise me you'll keep last night a secret until then?"

"Last night," Harry echoed with a slow grin, and nothing more useful to add on the subject.

Remus insisted on taking down the Christmas decorations promptly on New Year's Day, so to great grumbling, none the least from his new fiancé, they were occupied most of the day in work that Kreacher should have theoretically been doing for them, if he could have been bothered. But he couldn't, so Draco didn't get a single moment alone with anyone, let alone Harry, until just before dinner. And that was with Hermione, who wanted to gently admonish him on the class implications of his constant complaints that *Malfoys are above doing manual labor,* as if Draco wasn't well-aware. He was very receptive, though, having been so terrified she knew about him and Harry that he would have taken an intervention about his secret blood magic well in stride.

After the heights of the past night, New Year's Day was quiet, but the evidence of its transformations was there, with talk of plans for the Longbottoms to visit again before they all went back to Hogwarts, Sirius and Remus both wearing their rings, and Harry sneaking Draco even more looks than usual when he thought he wasn't looking. Mrs. Weasley made them a hearty stew from leftovers for dinner, though she wouldn't let him have any of the excellent red wine she'd paired with it. He tried to beg some off Bill- he was desperately in need of some liquid courage, to face up to what he'd done, the door he'd opened that he couldn't simply close again- but Bill proved far more difficult to talk into giving him alcohol than just stealing it from him. He just got another of Hermione's underage drinking lectures, to Ron's great amusement.

But eventually, the time he had to face Harry came, when he had stalled all day and evening until it was practically midnight again, and then passed it. Harry came up to his room after everyone else went to bed, like in the summer after nightmares. They ended up facing off in their pajamas this time, with the watch off Draco's nightstand reading 12:05 am. The fact that at home at Grimmauld, Draco's pajamas just consisted of a pair of worn and comfortable red Arsenal joggers, well, Draco was not about to give whatever was between them the dignity of changing from that. As if he was frightened to show Harry even that little of his body, for the things it would make them both want-

"Alohomora," the soft murmur of Harry's voice came from outside, and then the palpable sensation of every lock in the room opening. Harry's magic was so excessive for such small spells. He had no attention to or conception of his overuse, though. In Harry, there was no magical exhaustion or depletion like in Draco. His fount of magic seemed borderline inexhaustible.

Harry hadn't put his wand away yet, and then he reached under Draco's pillow. "What are you doing?" Draco hissed, twisting his head away to protect his hair. "You'll cut yourself-"

Harry just seemed to recognize this as indignation over taking his wand. "Don't worry, I'm just putting it over on that table. I'll put mine there too. I just don't want you to curse me first."

"Why would I be cursing you- no, Harry, don't- shit," Draco exhaled, as Harry's extraction of the wand also had him cutting his hand right under Draco's pillow. Draco just hoped that wouldn't bring back too many memories of the graveyard. "If you'd just listen, it's not only my wand under there-"

"What on Earth?" Harry breathed blankly, and pulled out the wand and the moonstone dagger, staring at the dagger's bloodied hilt. "Is this yours? What is this?" Draco refused to answer either of such obvious questions, and Harry went over and put them with his wand on the table across the room before coming back over. "Draco, why do you have that fancy knife under your pillow? I mean, I'd heard of sleeping with a knife under your pillow, but I thought it was just an expression- that wasn't for me, was it?"

"You really, *really* flatter yourself, Harry," Draco sighed, "If you think that dagger is for *you.* Now come here. I'll fix your hand, you irredeemable blunderbus." Harry came back over sheepishly, holding his palm concave so none of the crimson dripped on anything else of Draco's. "Oh, for Salazar's sake, Harry, you'll have to give me my wand a *second* to heal you."

"Sorry!" Harry ran back to get the talon wand. He shrunk back when Draco began to wave his wand and make a humming song over the cut, casting Vulnera Satentur. "What's that?"

"Advanced magic, Harry," Draco said dryly. "I know that's a foreign concept to you, but..." The wounds closed up quickly, though he did the pass twice more to finish sealing it completely. The palm was eerily perfect once he was done, like it had never been cut at all.

"You're so talented," Harry said breathlessly, in a voice like he was enjoying watching Draco heal him more than he should. Draco shot a look up through his pale eyelashes, and saw Harry's green eyes burning down with none of the fear they should have had. He kept his hand in Draco's, turning it over while he spoke. "That was brilliant. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to cause any trouble..."

"Why would I curse you?" Draco said skeptically. When Harry held out a hand for his wand, he hesitated. "With us disarmed, that's your advantage. You're physically stronger, in our experience, aren't you? Since first year... you broke the rules to win our duel by pinning me down..."

The memory put color on Harry's cheeks. "I'm not that strong," he muttered.

Draco smirked. "That's not what Theo would have said after you beat the shit out of him."

"I don't want to, er, beat *you* up," Harry muttered, "Promise," and Draco couldn't help it. It was stupid, but he handed his wand over to Harry with an indulgent smirk.

"What *do* you want, then, Harry?" Draco drawled, sprawling back against the pillows with his hands nonchalantly linked behind his head to show how unafraid he was. Probably to ask why that dagger had been there, for starters. Except with the cut and dagger out of sight, it seemed out of mind for Harry already, in comparison to what was immediately before his gaze. Draco waiting for him on the bed seemed to supersede anything else.

"You said we'd talk later," Harry said weakly, and climbed onto the foot of the bed when Draco did nothing to stop him. Draco watched him climb up with a terrible clogging of heat, a swimming conviction that he'd made a mistake giving away his wand. That was what made him feel strong, strong enough to protect himself from the things he wanted.

Draco smirked, pushing out a pale bare foot to prod at Harry's thigh, keeping him at bay. "Oh, and that's what you want, Harry? To talk?"

Harry let out a whining sound as Draco kept him back, hand going to grab Draco's instep. Draco kept smirking and just let him, even as Harry pushed it aside. Draco pushed up his other foot to keep Harry back, and Harry caught it after it prodded against his chest. Draco poked it at Harry, and Harry caught that too, grip suddenly iron on Draco's ankles, and Draco stopped laughing.

"Tell me," Draco ordered, "Why you're here. What you really want," and Harry let go of Draco's ankles, leaning over him with furtive, helpless eyes.

"You know what I want," Harry said miserably, staring at Draco's mouth, and the heat inside Draco was almost stifling, sensitivity already rising over his skin without even being touched. He could feel how hard his nipples were in the night air, could see Harry's eyes keep going to them like he wanted to put his fingers or his teeth on them, even with all of Draco cast into alabaster pallor by the pale blue wreath of light over their heads. "You've known, haven't you? You have, you just like to torment me... and last night, Draco..."

Harry risked all his do-gooder cred in that moment, by not making some passionate declaration of feeling, not demanding to talk about what had happened and what they were or any of that rot, but by falling into place over Draco, one hand and then another thudding onto the pillows, beside Draco's face. Draco moved his hands out of the way, and with them already behind his head, the only way for them to go was up, stretching back over the pillows with his wrists together like Harry's mere presence had cast Manibipiscatus.

Harry made the most indescribable choking sound at the sight, looking as oppressed by the reality of what he wanted as Draco felt. Harry's thick, growing dark hair was falling in disarray over his forehead, his scar still visible, but that scar had never interested Draco very much compared to those eyes... and now, after the taste of them, those lips.

Draco smirked, flicking out a foot again to playfully try to swat Harry back, and Harry caught his ankle again. "Do you want me to leave?"

"No, do *you* want to leave?" Draco snorted, amazed by Harry's recklessness, even for a Gryffindor. "You just cut yourself on a ritual dagger under my pillow. Under a *murderer's* pillow." Harry didn't blink at that. "You know, Pettigrew isn't even the only person I've ever killed," he added, thinking of Periander and Maledictum. And, indirectly, of Dumbledore.

Harry's gaze didn't falter, though he let go of Draco's ankle, more out of seeming obligation than revulsion. His free hand fell into place beside Draco's face too. "I don't believe you." Harry fixed their gazes together, as if that could assert his will on Draco, and not just his beauty with that sight. "You want me to think you're too dangerous to be any good for me. What, first your excuse is that you're not good enough, now it's that you're too *bad*..."

"I am, you know," Draco said softly. "I *am* bad. I'm a thousand times too dangerous." He didn't move his wrists from above his head.

Harry let out an agonized groan, eyes all over Draco before falling to his lips. "I know you're dangerous," he whispered. "I don't care." His fingers traced the fall of Draco's hair over the pillows.

All the blood along with the sense was going from Draco's head, but Draco tried to warn him. "You should care. You *should* be trying to tie me down- but to get *information* from me. *Torture* me. Force all my secrets out somehow. You should see me as your enemy-"

"You're not my enemy. You'll never be my enemy. And I'd walk through that fire again for you that proves it. Like I did before." The feeling was so fierce in Harry's eyes, something so intense and true burning for someone as impossibly ruined as Draco. "The shielding fire. Protego Diabolica. I'd walk through it just the same."

For one of the few times in the red line, Draco was completely speechless. He didn't know what to say. All he could do was lean up, staring at those lips that were so wrong to believe in him, and kiss them. From the way they fell eagerly on his, it was all too easy to forget why that belief was wrong in the first place. Harry would never hurt Draco. If it wasn't true the other way around...

That was the future. And Draco had Harry on top of him here and now, saying his name between kisses like it meant something other than doom. Harry said it like he loved him, and Draco was weak enough, as Harry's lips kissed feverishly, worshipfully at his hair, to pretend for that moment that he deserved it.

The Chained Dragon

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Mother,

I don't know if you got my last letters. I didn't expect you to write back. I understand that it might put you in danger for me to keep contacting you, and after this, I promise I won't.

Someone told me once that if you're going to leave Father, and leave his side, that it will have to be your choice and no one else's. But I want to tell you some things, at least, and I'll take the risk of anyone, Father or worse, getting to see them. I really hope this doesn't get you hurt.

I don't ever want us to be against each other. I didn't want to leave home. I didn't want to leave you alone with him. I just didn't have a choice after what I did. And I know it was my choice to do that, but I made that choice. And you can make that choice too.

I know how hard you tried to teach me what was right and wrong, Mother, but you were wrong. And I'm not just making that choice for Hermione, or for my uncle or my friends or anyone else. Maybe it was that at first. But now, I'm on the side I am because I don't believe what you taught me. I don't believe in purity of blood anymore. If I could burn *Toujours pur* off the Black tapestry I would, because there are so many more important things. And I don't think *you* really believe in what that side believes, not enough to want people to die because of it.

Mother, if you come to our side, I can protect you. I've gotten a lot more powerful. It's not just my wand. I've learned a lot more spells, I've practiced a lot of things, and I've done a lot of things. I don't know what you've been told or what you think about the things I've already done, but I'm going to do more, and there's no stopping it. I've picked a side, and I'm going to fight for it. I'm not going to stop at anything. And my side is going to win. So I want you on the winning side.

I love you, Mother.

If you're going to leave him, you should leave soon.

Draco

January 13, 1996. Aunt Bella and the others break out of Azkaban. The Daily Prophet reports it the next day. And then pages and pages later, *Sometime in June: Aunt Bella kills Sirius Black and Harry Potter mourns him*.

But today was not January 13th. It was January 5th, a week before they had to return to Hogwarts, and today was as good a day as any to sidle up to Harry when he could catch him alone, and whisper, "Wanna do something really stupid with me?"

Harry nodded right away, and followed with a grin on his face as Draco led him by the hand up the stairs to his bedroom. The grin only began to fade when Draco Apparated them out of the bedroom, to the front of a building no British wizard would ever not recognize, snow-white with burnished gold doors, guarded on either side by liveried goblins.

"Do you need money?" Harry asked blankly, and looked between himself and Draco, seeming to notice the discrepancy between his own casual Muggle clothes, and Draco's perfect sweeping Slytherin-green and silver robes, the S evil eye clasp prominently displayed on the back of his head. "Uh, Draco, what are we- should I have dressed up?"

"No, you're perfect," Draco said dismissively. "You look more Harry Potter-ish that way. Humble defender of the downtrodden. I'm the one who has to look pureblooded as fuck." Harry did not seem to relish the idea, especially after Draco led them in with a haughty nod past the goblins. The famous inscription against thievery was inscribed on the silver doors past the bronze ones, which Harry eyed fearfully and Draco ignored. He didn't need anything making him more nervous than he was already. Not that he intended to let Harry or anyone here see it for a second.

Draco led Harry up the long white marble hall, waiting until he saw a goblin he recognized as having waited upon him and his parents several times. They had used to all look the same to him, but after learning to distinguish house elves from each other quite clearly, it seemed he had a better eye for goblins as well.

"Young Mr. Malfoy," the goblin said, immediately bowing at the sight of him. He had an aged, distinguished look to his narrow eyes, a larger proportion of golden filigree on his clothes, and Draco thought he shared the memories. Although Draco might already be recognizable to many in the wizarding world by now, at least with someone who was obviously Harry Potter by his side. Other patrons and goblins had all begun to stare in Harry's direction as they made their progress, and this goblin was no different.

"We've met a number of times before, haven't we," Draco said, wracking his memory, "Adrast?" and the goblin Adrast nodded. Draco did not mean the recognition to be friendly, but to show he knew enough to keep a grudge if defied. "I'm here to empty the vaults for this wand, as the Lord of House Black." He took the talon wand and laid it on the counter. Harry exhaled sharply. Draco shot him a warning look, and Harry seemed to compose himself, though it was a struggle.

"You know," Harry hissed, "When you asked if you wanted to do something stupid, this *really* isn't what I thought you meant."

"My family has lost the key to her vault," Draco said calmly, "And as she is currently... indisposed, we have no means to bring her here personally to secure one. You know me as her nephew, and I assume my possession of her wand should work as identification without the key."

"This wand," Adrast said, recognizing it instantly, "Is indeed that of your aunt, one Bellatrix Lestrange, is it not? I mean to accuse *you* of nothing, young man, but if perhaps, somehow, without your knowledge, the wand has been stolen, young man, the wards of Gringotts will-"

"I am aware," Draco sneered, "Of the protections against theft here, but watch your tongue, *Adrast*, before this feeble feigning at not accusing me of it. Test the wand however you like. You will find that I am the rightful owner of it, and of the vault attached to it." Adrast held out his hand, and Draco handed the wand over with no few misgivings. But it did not hurt Adrast, nor did it seem to show anything awry when Adrast murmured several spells under his breath, passing his hands a few centimeters over it. The wand turned gold and then green with light, and Adrast nodded.

"You are indeed the rightful owner of this wand," he said, and the first stepping stone was cleared. "But you are a minor child. And the account is not in your name, nor do I recall any reference to you in the account-"

"You can check if you like," Draco said coldly, drawing himself up and putting on every fiber of his pureblood hauteur. If Harry didn't like him this way, well, Draco had ways to win him back on side rather more quickly now. "But there's no point. What I *am* is the head of House Black. I am its lord, the last living male descendent. Here is a wizarding photograph of the current Black family tapestry," he said, and produced a black folder with the Black family insignia on its front.

"You will also find a Muggle photograph, and a spelled miniature replica of the tapestry that replicates its current status. As you will see, Bellatrix Lestrange has been disinherited from House Black. Due to her lifetime prison sentence, she has no means to contest this disinheritance. As you may observe, while Sirius Black is currently at large again from Azkaban, he was disinherited many years ago. My mother, the only living member of the Black line, is not only female, but has formally ceded any claim to the Black funds and titles. Is not the account in the name of House Black, rather than House Lestrange? And can there be any doubt to the legitimacy of this tapestry? I have brought a witness of unimpeachable stature to the disinheritance of Bellatrix Lestrange, Harry James Potter. Will *his* integrity be questioned?"

The bit with the tapestry was razzle-dazzle. Draco had no idea if that or even inheritance law as whole had much to do with the vault issue. But his goal here was just shock and awe. Throwing shit to the wall and seeing what stuck.

"No- no, of course not, Mr. Malfoy," Adrast said, eyes huge with fear now, "But-"

"You may travel to 12 Grimmauld Place with me, or send any of your representatives if you doubt the legitimacy of this testimony," Draco bluffed.

"Mr. Malfoy, that will not be necessary- not with Harry Potter bearing witness, but-"

"If you doubt my mother's acceptance of my lordship of House Black," Draco bluffed again, "I would be happy to contact her and summon her here to verify-"

"Mr. Malfoy, again, that should not be necessary, but-"

"I do not have all day, Adrast," Draco said, cold as the grave. "Or should I let your superiors at Gringotts know you lack full understanding of inheritance law in House Black, as opposed to less *historical* wizarding houses? Could a goblin of your age and stature *not* be familiar with the ancient codes of the Sacred Twenty Eight? Unless you are personally *opposed* to those codes- and with the evidence I have brought to bear of my legitimate right to this vault, I will take any further delay as an expression of personal opposition on your part-"

"Very well, Mr. Malfoy," Adrast said, looking twenty years older after the past five minutes. He handed Draco back his wand and called, "Griphook?" The Goblin Draco remembered as the escort for these trips came up, staring at Harry Potter, before Adrast magically summoned the key to Bellatrix Lestrange's vault.

"You are aware, Mr. Malfoy," Adrast said as they followed Griphook, "That there is a significant number of enchantments placed on this vault?"

"Given that I am the lawful holder of this vault," Draco called back haughtily, "I would hardly expect that *you* would need to warn *me* what is inside. Know your *place,* Adrast."

Griphook had overheard that last sneering command, and looked none too pleased as he led them towards the passageway to the carts. Not that he should have been, given the curses he was about to face. Having bluffed and bullied his way to the vault, Draco was now to face a more stringent test. He'd gambled that the wand would register as legally his. Now he gambled on what that wand could do.

The passage through Gringotts was familiar, caves and dragons that had used to fascinate Draco as a child, now mere background to Harry's furious face, pulling him close to whisper in his ear, "What the hell have you gotten me into?"

Draco had a trump card, and he played it without flinching. "Don't you want to give Frank and Alice Longbottom back their wands?"

"Those are in her vault?" Harry asked, as if the thought had never occurred to him.

Perhaps it had never occurred to him because it wasn't true. "Of course they are," Draco lied. "I know for a fact that Aunt Bella took them as trophies, and hid them here before she got caught." He knew no such thing, but it kept Harry in line.

Eventually, they landed near a great gray blinded dragon. Draco had never actually been in Aunt Bella's vaults, only the Malfoy and once the Nott one. There was something powerful but tragic about the dragon, marred with scars of abuse that kept it in line, something once majestic now withered and unnatural. It reminded Draco of the corpse of Maledictum, all the color gone out as he was laid in the ground. It still could breathe fire to keep them out, which made Draco but neither of the others jump back.

Griphook gave the supposed rightful owner of the vault a wry look, before withdrawing a number of cymbal-like gold instruments called clankers. The dragon had been conditioned to withdraw at the sound- a sight objectively against the laws of nature, a dragon trained just like a common Crup, but Draco supposed no one was immune to pain.

"Here's a dragon who's been tied down and held captive," Draco whispered in Harry's ear. "Still like the sound of that?"

Harry glared at him as they followed Griphook. "You know I didn't mean an actual *dragon*..." he hissed. The feel of his breath on Draco's ear made him fight not to shiver.

Griphook shot them a suspicious stare, before pressing his hand to the vault to open it. "Did you know," Draco said brightly by way of distraction, "Harry once fought a dragon? A Hungarian Horntail, not an Ukrainian Ironbelly like this one. It was in the-"

"The Triwizard Tournament. Even goblins read the Daily Prophet," Griphook grumbled, and the vault came open, like the shadow in front of a cavern suddenly dropping away.

It was like a cave, as impressive and foreboding as Aunt Bella had used to brag. It was like something from millennia ago, the treasure lair of a real dragon. Gold glimmered not just from coins but everywhere, on goblets and armor, with gems all over those and the stoppers of mysterious potions, not to even speak of the dead creatures, with their skins and bones laid out in a sort of artistic spiral pattern that bore the distinct imprint of Aunt Bella's loving care. There was even, far in the back, a softer glow of her favorite snow globes. Beside them, there was a crown with a skull on it. Or one might call it a skull with a crown on it. Both things were true.

Draco wanted it. He wanted *all* of it.

"I told you I'm emptying it out, *goblin*," Draco ordered haughtily. "All of it. I'll need receptacles. Why have they not already been brought? Enlist more of your kind if you need, but I will not be delayed by the likes of you." Griphook grunted, eyes angry but resigned, and walked off past the dragon, with the clankers going at full volume again.

Harry and Draco were left to stare at the expanse of gold before them. "This is the creepiest thing I have ever seen," Harry said.

At the same time, Draco breathed out reverently, "This is so cool."

Harry shot Draco a startled look. "You *are* mad," he said for the hundredth time, almost sounding as if he meant it. But that didn't seem enough of an impediment to keep him from leaning in and stealing a kiss anyway, a shock of reassuring warmth that had Draco gripping onto Harry's shoulders. He tried to ground himself in the increasingly familiar feeling of those addictive lips, the brush of Harry's nose and his glasses' round frames, the tug of his hands in his hair...

Harry finally had to be the one to pull away. "So what do we do now, just wait for the goblins? You didn't need to be so rude to them, by the way..."

"I did, though," Draco said calmly. "They aren't helping us out of unshakeable conviction of my right to this vault. It's a combination of doubt and fear. And now I have to take the curses down." He laughed at the look on Harry's face. "What, did you think there wouldn't be? Of course there are curses. But it feels like Aunt Bella is the one who cast them, so hopefully her wand will work well to take them down." It might have been a mistake not to try and bamboozle Bill Weasley, the professional Curse Breaker at home, into helping them as well.

"What do you mean it feels like your aunt cast them?"

"It feels like her magic," Draco said absently, and quickly lied, "I can feel it because I have her wand." *I can do this,* he told himself, *And even if I can't, even if it kills me, this is all bonus. Sirius is free, the Longbottoms are sane, I've done what I was sent back for. Which means I'm already far past my expiration date.*

"You're being reckless," Harry said, and Draco turned and flashed a manic grin.

"I'm not reckless, I'm dangerous," Draco teased. "And you like dangerous, don't you?"

He turned back to the vault, fortified by the helpless admiration in those eyes. He had to admit, he'd brought Harry along as much for that as the authority of being Famous Harry Potter.

"The Flagrante curse and the Geminio curse," Draco said to himself. He had the memory of Aunt Bella teaching him how to guard objects before sixth year. His mission working with magical artifacts at Hogwarts had rendered it necessary in her mind. They'd never proved necessary, but the Flagrante curse was certainly useful, and it meant she had also taught him the counter-curses. "Lumos," he cast, and examined the contents of the vault more closely. There was nothing in the look of them to indicate those curses were there, let alone worse ones that Aunt Bella had never taught him. But he could feel the dark energy seething from them, a signature all her own.

He had hoped that these curses, notoriously difficult to break when cast by anyone, let alone a dark witch as powerful as her, would be easier to undo with the wand that cast them. There was folk wisdom on that front, undoing curses by the same wand, though Draco didn't know if it was actually officially proven. But he had that to hold onto for faith in himself as he took a deep breath, pointed at the closest thing, a pile of coins, and cast, "Aduro occuro!"

The Darkfire counter-curse shot out blue and white sparks, hitting the coins with enough of a clamor that he could tell the spell had met a fitting target. The ghost of reddish flames showed in an aura around the coins, before the blue swept over them and seemed to put it out. "Aveho defixio!" Draco cast next, a more general curse-breaking spell that should disarm the Doubling charm. When he finally, tentatively reached out, laying the fingertip of the pinky on his left hand on a single coin, nothing happened.

"What are you doing?" Harry called, looking in the opposite direction as if keeping watch, and that wasn't the worst idea. Having to Curse-Break to get into a vault probably wasn't the greatest sign of legitimacy to it.

"Making it safe," Draco called back. "Keep watch, will you? Holler if you see them coming... stall if you have to... try and talk to them about being Famous Harry Potter, that might help..."

"I hate you!" Harry yelled, voice stressed but still affectionate, and Draco laughed.

"I know!" he yelled back, and turned to the vault with renewed determination, taking in each individual clump of items and casting Aduro occuro and Aveho defixio over and over on each. He let the clamps all loose on the talon wand, and could feel exhaustion setting in steadily, like he hadn't felt since fourth year, from the effort of burning the dark magic off by sheer brute force. This kind of magic did not come naturally to him, and he couldn't do it in en masse like a real Curse Breaker. But when he heard clankers returning, they were soon met by the sound of a chattering Harry Potter along with several goblin voices, pestering them about the dragon there- and then, yes, insisting on telling them the story of when he had fought a dragon in the Triwizard tournament.

Draco could barely stand by the time he'd finished with the last item, a surprisingly resilient little antique golden cup like a chalice that had persistently radiated menace no matter how many counter-curses Draco cast on it. But eventually, he took the risk of pressing a fingernail to it, and nothing happened, so Draco felt confident to stroll back out of the fault, and call, "Harry, is that the goblins with you? Holding up the help by bragging again? Come on, I have better things to do!"

The look on Sirius's face when he came up the stairs looking for Draco, only to find him and Harry in Regulus's old bedroom, was comical. The look when he saw the new contents of that room was more so. When Draco joined Harry in feeling curiously through the nearest box, Sirius could only let out a hoarse yell of, "Remus! Get up here!"

"Draco, what is all this?" Hermione breathed, coming up in front of Remus, and freezing at the sight of all the mysterious awful things strewn across the bedroom of Sirius's dead brother. "Where did you get all this? You didn't even leave the-" But she knew he could Apparate, and her mouth abruptly shut.

"Bill?" Draco yelled past her, feeling the effort of just raising his voice making him faint, and swayed against the box he was inspecting. "Bill Weasley, is he here? He's the one we'll want..."

"Why?" Hermione asked, and Draco shrugged, staring up fondly into her big brown eyes.

"Curse Breaker," he said logically, and passed out.

He awoke, as after so many misadventures, to the sight of Severus Snape, staring down at him with an infinitely unimpressed look on his face.

"Oh," Draco yawned, "Hey," and pressed his face back into the pillow.

"You have slept," Severus intoned. "For two days, Draco. Has that not been enough?"

"Two days?" Draco echoed, and rolled back over, opening his eyes. "Seriously?" All the bluebell flames and wreath of light had gone out, leaving the silver room looking rather dim and dingy by only Severus's candle. He reached under his pillow, only to find his wand and dagger absent. Severus looked down at the nearest dresser drawer. Draco reached for them, but Severus laid down a hand to keep the drawer shut. "What, I just want to get the lighting back I usually..."

"You," Severus informed him coldly, "Are in no state to be doing any magic right now. At least not without a *week* of your infusions. I have received a full account from Lupin of your unpermitted exploration under the auspices of *his* guardianship, and-"

"He didn't do anything, it's not his fault," Draco tried.

"Right," Severus said dismissively. "Soon after their nauseating engagement announcement, they are distracted enough to let a fifteen-year-old sneak out and rob the most powerful dark witch in the world? You expect me to find this a coincidence? I should never have left you with them for a day, let alone as long as this. I should have *known* you would walk all over these-"

"You say rob Aunt Bella like it's a bad thing," Draco interrupted, voice tight. His body felt numb from head to toe in his pajamas, like it was only yet half his own again. "But she's in Azkaban for life. *Isn't* she? Unless you know something different."

It was obvious that Severus's position as a spy had already apprised him of what was coming. "Do *you*?" Severus said, and prodded so overtly at Draco's mind then, he had to *want* Draco to feel his show of distrust.

Sometimes Draco wondered if there was some kind of Langlock in his own head. His shields had been strong after months with Aunt Bella, but never that strong, and certainly not strong enough to continually withstand attacks in a weakened state, especially not by Legilimens as powerful as Severus and even the Dark Lord. He could only be glad of it at the moment, adrift as it left him. "No, Severus, I only went to the vaults to get-"

"To get the Longbottoms back their wands," Severus finished, in a voice like he didn't believe it for a second. "Potter was insistent upon this point, yes. He seemed intent upon painting you as some earnest do-gooder who was blameless in all proceedings. And the wands *were* found in one of the boxes, so he maintains still that these were your intentions. Quite the obedient *servant* to you throughout. What could have inspired such... *dauntless* loyalty?"

Draco stared up as innocently as he could. "Harry cares a lot about Neville."

"Right," Severus said disgustedly. "It is *that* altruistic motive that moved you, and not concern for your inheritance after what you did with the Longbottoms." Draco blinked in surprise that Severus obviously took as fake. "You may not be one in name, but with that, you have marked yourself as a member of the Order of the Phoenix, and a powerful one. Can your formal disowning from the Malfoy name be far behind?"

Draco swallowed. "I thought the Dark Lord wanted to bring me to his side... you *said*..."

"Do you not think," Severus said savagely, "This theft will complicate that? Do you think it wise to test that madman's *patience*?"

"Will you look at the things I got from the vault?" Draco asked instead. "It's everything..."

"Bill Weasley," Severus said curtly, "Has been called into action, examining the safety of the objects you brought by illegal Apparition into your uncle's house. I was called upon by Headmaster Dumbledore to join him. Most of the items, we have determined, have been successfully stripped of dark magic..." His eyes lingered on Draco, disturbed rather than impressed by that feat. "But a few are of such a composition that I will be taking them with me to Hogwarts to examine in greater safety. If their new owner would be so kind as to oblige."

"Yes, Severus," Draco said, and tried to fight back another wave of exhaustion. "I really don't feel good, Severus... I swear I'm not, ah, playing it up for- for sympathy..."

He yawned, and Severus shook his head wryly. "What were the curses on the vault?"

"Just Flagrante and Geminio," Draco yawned again, and Severus's prodding at his mind this time was almost vicious, though it got him eternally nowhere.

"And you know how to counter those curses how?"

"Read about it," Draco said around a yawn, "In a book. Flagrante... is one of my signatures, you know..." Severus looked so disgusted by the notion of his fifteen-year-old godson having signature curses, plural, he was capable of pulling out his own wand and showing Draco how Flagrante was properly done. "With-" Another yawn. "With Oppugno, you know..."

"Oh, I know," Severus said curtly. "I indulged you in practicing dark magic, and impressed upon you the importance of a full arsenal at the start of the year. But that does not mean I meant for you to be immoderate and reckless in its use... DRACO!" he finally bellowed, eloquence defeated.

"You can punish me however you want, Severus," Draco whined, "But I feel so shitty, my body's already punishing me..."

"I have provided you," Severus said coolly, "With a full complement of new angel's infusions of doubled strength. You will desist from practicing a single spell until you return to Hogwarts, or I will personally take that wand of yours and snap it myself. Is that understood?"

"Understood," Draco said.

And he and Severus did seem to have come to an understanding.

No such understanding was forthcoming from Sirius, who was the only one to visit him the next day, save an incredibly sullen Kreacher carrying up meals. Apparently Sirius and Remus had forbidden visitors without express permission, to give Draco time to rest. The only times Draco even got out of bed were to use the en suite accommodation, where he also took his angel's infusions. Otherwise, he sat in his dim kingdom, whose silvery walls looked ghostly without the flames he was not allowed to cast. He slept, occasionally ate, or read or wrote with whatever paltry concentration he could muster. He had the bad luck to be staring blankly at a page of his favorite book, *Moste Dark Blood Rituals of the Demon Goddess Hecate,* when Sirius came for a visit. It seemed he would only get one daily, as some mixture of offering him rest and punishment. So far, it had only been authority figures come to yell at him. Draco hastily shoved the book under the covers.

"What were you thinking, Draco? Illegal Apparition, I thought you had stopped that- you shouldn't even know *how*-"

"If I hadn't known how to Apparate in third year, you wouldn't be *alive*-"

The rest of the visit only worsened from there. Eventually, Sirius got so angry that his bellowing attracted Remus, who took Sirius by the arm and marched him out back down the stairs. Though not without a mournful look at Draco on his way out.

Remus came the next morning, carrying breakfast instead of Kreacher. He'd brought his own, and set Draco's tray on his lap in bed before pouring them both some jasmine-scented Earl Grey. Draco hadn't had the energy to feel upset yet, but nothing was more guilt-inducing than Remus's calm non-judgmental exterior. "I'm sorry," was forced out of him before even finishing his almond croissant. "I shouldn't have gone behind your back- shouldn't have involved Harry-"

"It seems you know most of what I'm about to say," Remus said mildly. He stroked Draco's hair out of his eyes with a gentleness that just made Draco more wary. He could feel the soft, magical touch of the snowdrop on Remus's ring brushing his forehead.

"Are you going to take away the Firebolt?"

Remus looked bewildered. "No. Of course not. Why would you think..." He shook his head. "No, Draco, we would never do that to you. We care about you, I hope you know that. But that doesn't mean there doesn't have to be punishment for this."

"Oh," Draco said dully. He should have known. Gryffindors were soft, but even he knew how badly he'd stepped over the line. It would be more deserved than nearly any punishment Father had given. "Okay. I guess you already have my wand. And my dagger isn't on me either." He didn't want them on his person. Not that he wasn't too weak from magical exhaustion for his weapons to likely be of much use anyway. "Go on, then."

"This is going to sting," Remus warned, and Draco sat up, turning his back to him. "What are you doing?"

"Will you just get it over with?" Draco asked, forcing his lips open where they had clamped shut so he could keep breathing regularly. "Do you want me to take my shirt off first? Or

something else? I won't fight. Just don't let me have my wand so I don't feel tempted to-"

"Draco?" Remus breathed, in such audible horror that Draco had to turn. Remus had never looked more caught off-guard. "What is it you expect me to *do*?"

"You said you were going to punish me," Draco said, frowning. "And that it would sting. So aren't you going to beat me now?"

Remus looked horrified, and doubly horrified by Draco's nonchalant tone. "No! Of course not! Draco, saying it would sting, that's a figure of speech! I just meant you won't *like* it. The punishment is that you're barred from the Black library at this house until the end of fifth year, and that we aren't going to let Luna visit for the rest of break. Why would you think I would *beat* you?"

"Whatever," Draco muttered, and lay back down in bed, avoiding Remus's gaze.

"Draco," Remus said, putting their breakfast trays aside with his voice choked in agitation, "Is that how you are used to having your guardians punish you? With beatings?"

Draco shrugged, staring at the wall. "It's not a big deal. It's just normal-"

"It's not normal at all for a child to be beaten as punishment, whatever they've done!" Remus exclaimed passionately. "Look at me. *Draco*!" Draco reluctantly rolled back over to stare at him, and saw Remus's kind face alight with genuine outrage. "Who disciplines you this way? Your godfather?"

"No!" Draco exclaimed, voice rising in his own outrage, at the thought of Severus tarred by that brush. "Never! He's not like that. He *protects* me. It's only ever been my father to hit me. And that's just normal in pureblood circles, all my friends have their fathers discipline them corporally..."

"Then I'm glad you're here with us," Remus said firmly, "And not with him. You expected a *beating* from me... Oh, Draco, I am sorry. I am so, so sorry. I wish I had known sooner-"

"Don't freak out," Draco said, rolling his eyes. "It's not like he wallops me within an inch of my life or something. It's just stinging hexes and sometimes his walking stick, it's fine. Mostly just my back. It's nothing compared to Crucio-"

"Draco, who's used the Cruciatus curse on you?" Remus demanded. "Was it in the graveyard?" Draco shook his head bleakly, too out of it to think how he was incriminating himself. "Was it at home at your manor? Was it your family?" Draco didn't say anything. Aunt Bella would count as family, but that was the blue loop. Except when he was this drained, sometimes it was hard to sort out which memories were which between them.

"Oh, Draco," said Remus, voice choking up. "Draco, I know it's 'normal' to purebloods. Sirius's parents disciplined him in a similar way. He said that if it ever came up, he would prefer for me to tell you, rather than talk about it himself. He is still... reticent to discuss it, with anyone, even me. But he wanted you to know- if you had that experience, that he had shared it, so he knows enough to understand it some. And he agrees with me that the way it's

done is vicious and excessive. It's not just child discipline. The use of heavy objects like a stick for beating- the use of dark magic to punish *children*- that's evil, I can say that without doubt. And you should never have had to face that, never, no matter what you could *ever* have done that your family might have used to justify it..."

"If you're going to keep babbling inanely," Draco said crossly, "You might as well give me a hug," and stretched out his arms. Remus took them, seizing him with a fierce protectiveness that made Draco guilty. "Come on, don't be upset," he coaxed. "You're imagining it worse than it was... it wasn't even that bad when Father let Mother use healing magic on me after..."

Remus took that oppositely as intended. "You mean that sometimes he *wouldn't* let her?"

"Yes," Draco admitted. "Those times were... but they were never that often... I'm sorry..."

"You are never going back there," Remus said, something slotting into his voice like welded steel.

"He..." Draco took a deep breath. "But he... he does care for me. He would have *died* for me. He threw himself in front of me, when the Dark Lord was going to kill me. After my Killing curse hit Wormtail. He pleaded for me..."

"And if Voldemort had executed the Malfoy heir for disobedience," Remus said tiredly, "Would your father have been far behind, do you think?"

Draco's heart hurt just that little bit worse as he understood, stripped in a second of one of his very few still-remaining illusions.

Self-preservation. That's all it was. He wasn't pleading for me, just for himself. Everything he has ever done has always just been for himself-

Slowly, throat catching, Draco shook his head.

Remus's gaze stayed steady as steel. "Draco, I promise you, your father is never going to hurt you again."

Remus visited Draco every day for the rest of break, something more purposeful in the quiet shows of concern now. It was like his belief in his guardianship of Draco had solidified, if only out of pity. Sirius came by the next day, and attempted the most awkward conversation of Draco's life. He tried to talk about the abuse he had suffered in this very house, at the same ages as Draco, until they were both sweating, pale, and more than happy to promise the other to leave this sort of thing to Remus in the future. And neither said a word to the students, as Ron visited the next day without any pity on his face, and indeed a positive glow of admiration.

Ron wanted to hear all about the adventure, though he'd gotten details out of Harry and Bill already. "I can't believe you robbed Bellatrix Lestrange. Mum won't say it, but she's so pleased. You know she thinks that woman was one of the ones who did in my uncles, don't

you?" Draco nodded warily. "Well, Mum was already fond of you before, but she thinks you're the bees knees now. Who do you think made you this jumbo cinnamon cupcake?" he laughed, producing said cupcake with a flourish. It proved to be roughly the size of Ron's head, filled with cream cheese, and quite possibly the best thing that Draco had ever tasted.

Hermione came in with an air opposite to Ron's, though she had her own present for him, in the form of a book on wand science. "I found this near the back of the Black library," she said by way of greeting, "Since you're banned from it now, but I couldn't find anything useful in it to explain what happened with the Longbottoms. Maybe you could find something, though. You seem to know a lot of things that I don't know."

Draco didn't need to be her best friend to tell how angry she was. "Striker," he whined in his most pathetic voice, "You can be as mad at me as you want, but just know I'm suffering for it. You have no idea how little energy I have, I can't face you being angry with me too..."

"Maybe," Hermione said, slamming the book down on his bedside table before rounding on him, "You should talk to me before doing something so incredibly reckless! When you got these wild ideas, Draco, like trying to help Sirius, you never used to keep them from me! Now it's Luna or Harry you'll bring in, because they won't question you like I do!"

She'd clearly had time to think about this, and they both knew she was right. "Hermione," Draco said, reaching out fuzzily for her hand. "I'm practically on my deathbed-"

"Your godfather said you should be perfectly fine given enough rest," she said primly, "Which you wouldn't need so much of if you had let me help you! Do you really think if you came to me about this, I wouldn't have gone with you? Haven't I proven myself to you by now?"

Her frustration was evidently a long time coming. Draco made himself sit up. The passion in her voice was something he was ill-equipped to handle, but couldn't afford to ignore. "You wouldn't have told Sirius and Remus? Really?"

"Why shouldn't they be told?" Hermione said, crossing her arms. "If you had a good explanation, Draco, then sure, I wouldn't have. But you just want someone who'll do what you tell them blindly because you have pretty hair, or because you yell cousin at them cutely enough-what does it say about a person, Draco, when they push away the people who challenge them?"

"Okay, don't you think that's a little harsh on the others?" Draco said, though he had to smile at her judgment of Harry. "And Hermione, it's not just that- I didn't want you at Gringotts because it would be dangerous-"

"But you took Harry there," she pursued. "You think I can handle myself less than him? Draco, if you had let me help, there would have been two of us working on those enchantments. I could have learned those spells and done some of the curse-breaking, you know I could. And you keep even more secrets from me these days- you think I didn't notice how familiar Luna was with all your blood magic books?" Okay, maybe Draco had been underestimating her observational skills. "I can't tell if it's that we're growing apart as friends,

or that you've gotten so careless these days, you can't afford to be around someone who understands how reckless you're being-"

"Hermione," Draco said, very awake now for all the wrong reasons. A lump had come into his throat, threatening to make him lose his composure. He could see tears in her eyes already. "We're not growing apart as friends, I promise. I don't like you any less as a person-"

"But you don't trust me!" she protested, biting her lip in what looked a losing battle at holding back the tears from falling. "And then you end up like this! I don't want to hold you back, I don't want to tell on you or make your life harder- I just want to protect you, but I never know what's happening with you before it's too late, and you get hurt and I can't do a thing to stop it-"

"I know what happened at the graveyard must have been hard to-"

"I'm not talking about that, Draco! Not *just* that! It's everything!" Hermione shrieked, tears falling freely now. Draco had taken her shaking hands and she didn't even seem to feel it. "You trashed the entire Slytherin dressing room after you lost to Harry, and wouldn't speak to him for weeks, and you flirt with Theo Nott all the time even though you don't fancy him, you fancy Harry and we both know it, and just- nothing you do makes any sense! And Luna is worried about you too. She heard Neville talking to his parents. Apparently, he said you offered to let him use the Reductor curse on your wand, just vaporize it, even though you knew it could make you a Squib. What *is* that, Draco? Don't you care about becoming an Unspeakable anymore? It's like you're- I don't know, self-destructive! It's like you've just stopping caring about what happens to you!"

Tears pricked at Draco's eyes. "Hermione, I don't want to make you sad... I'll be alright, I'm tough, I promise... and even if I'm not..."

"You're not immortal!" Hermione snapped. "And if you keep being this reckless, sooner or later, Draco, it's going to catch up with you! Do you remember what you said, when you took Ron's place as the knight in first year? Ever since you came back from Gringotts, I can't get it out of my head. I remember exactly what it was. It was *scary*. You said we needed Ron but we didn't need you. That you were just useless, and it was always going to be the three of us, not you. You don't still think that, do you? I thought you didn't, but... oh, Draco, don't cry..."

Draco had dissolved into messy sobs. He didn't think she was right, but if she wasn't, why was he crying like this? "I'm not," he said, and she hugged him tightly enough that it was easy to pull her down to cuddle, burying his face in her thick hair. "I'm sorry, Hermione, I'm sorry..."

"Tell me you don't still think that," she pressed, grabbing at his shoulder, and he didn't answer. "Draco!" Her voice sharpened like she had seen him standing on the edge of a cliff.

"I don't know," Draco said tiredly, sniffling between his sentences. "I don't. I just... there are more important things than *me*, Hermione-"

"NOT TO ME!" she shrieked, and shook him. "You're my best friend, Draco Malfoy, in case you've forgotten! You're the first real friend I ever had! You know that, don't you? I spent my

whole life with children who didn't get me, who laughed at me for being smart. Even the other nerds and bookworms thought I was too bossy or awkward, but you, you were *like* me, Draco. You've always been there for me, even when I wasn't for you- I can't lose you, I *can't*-"

"You're the first real friend I ever had either," Draco sighed.

"Then why is it like you're trying to get yourself killed?" Hermione gasped out. "I need you, Draco. Even if you feel like we'd be better off with you gone, you're wrong. I swear to you, *I* need you. I need you too much for you to just- just risk going away and never coming back-" She grabbed onto him and began to sob in abject terror. "Oh, God, Frankenstein, I *hate* you..."

"That's what Harry says all the time," Draco said weakly, and sniffled louder, his tears dying down while hers picked up. "Striker, I'm sorry... I wish I could let you in on everything. You're right, I have so many secrets, and there are so many things I just can't tell you... but I'll tell..." He took a deep breath. "I'll tell you all I can."

He meant it. He was being foolish, but he felt weak, and Hermione was crying, and maybe a part of him *had* been hoping things would go wrong at Gringotts and end this farce at redemption.

"Why did you go to that vault?" Hermione demanded.

Draco was as honest as he could be. "Because I think the Death Eaters are going to be broken out of Azkaban soon." Hermione's sob turned into a gasp, and Draco managed not to lie, just omit, as he told her what had been said about the Dementors during that night in the graveyard, his paranoia about it happening, and Severus's hesitation when asked that made Draco think he knew something. "I think my aunt will be out of Azkaban soon and want the wand back-"

"Haven't you just *ensured* she'll be coming after you?" Hermione asked, and Draco shrugged.

"She'd be coming anyway, Hermione. And not just for the wand. Her and my whole *family* will. Do you know why Severus made me Quidditch captain? It's because the Dark Lord still wants me to join his side. The story is that I *meant* to kill Wormtail. So Severus and all the Death Eaters are trying to get on my *good* side..."

Draco talked on and on and on. He talked about Severus, about dark magic, about the dueling lessons and casting Protego Diabolica and Harry walking through the fire. He told her about hearing that Sirius and Remus wanted to adopt Harry but couldn't, and why, and how he'd stopped teaching Harry Occlumency because he hadn't wanted to help them. He told her about the deals he'd made with his father in the summers to be able to visit her. He told her about using the Imperius curse in second-year to save him, Ron, and Harry in the Forbidden Forest from Aragog. He told her how he practiced Unforgivable curses on spiders. He told her how he'd feared for Harry being kidnapped, and made a potion stealing his blood with Luna as his helper, and then kept on talking, to divert from that utter horror at the Naufragiam. He told her he'd been in love with Harry since the first time he ever saw him. He

threw out quickly about his father making him see Periander, and casting Avada Kedavra for the first time.

He told her how Periander's bird had sickened and died, and the ritual he had been drawn into, and Trelawney's prophecy, and then her first prophecy a year ago. And then of Severus finding Periander dead and having left him his moonstone dagger from the ritual. He showed her the drawer the dagger was being currently kept. She got it and held it silently as he told her about Periander saying he should stop using his wand, even if it made him a Squib, because the alternative was worse. He talked about what he and Theo had found out last year from writing letters, finding his Astaroth necklace and holding it to his chest. He talked about writing letters to his mother, and sending her the Black earrings.

He talked about the wands that had melted when Mother took him to Ollivander's, the force field a block around it the next time, the brands that had been left on the hands of not just his parents, Sirius, and Karkaroff, but Umbridge, and Umbridge's by means of the Flagrante curse. He told her about that and the Blood Quill and the threats he'd made against Umbridge to protect Harry and Severus and the Slytherin team, about using Cauterizo on Umbridge, talking and talking until his tired throat was beyond sore.

"You really don't tell me anything, do you," she said quietly, and he smiled weakly.

"I'm trying to now," he said with a sigh. "Everything I can, I swear."

"Everything you can," she echoed, closing her eyes. They were still tear-swollen, though she'd stopped crying a while ago. "Which means there's still more you're not telling me." She seemed to find it almost beyond belief, and yet undeniable.

"Hermione," Draco said tiredly, "Do you want to know one thing that *will* interest you?"

She nodded, looking like she had aged twenty years in the past hour of revelations. "I want to know as much as I can, Draco," she said bravely. "I'm trying not to judge you. All the things you've done... I was right, you haven't been telling me things anymore, but I understand why you did them. I can see you're just trying to protect the people you care about. Even before trying to protect yourself."

"Harry and I kissed," Draco blurted.

"WHAT?" Hermione shrieked. "You mean when you were under the Imperius curse?"

"Yes!" Draco hoped to put smiles on both their faces, which felt to have seen too much crying for several lifetimes. "I thought you'd guessed that. It's how I got him through the Portkey."

"You met at the Astronomy Tower. It wasn't hard to figure out."

"That wasn't the only time, though." Draco took a deep breath. "I'm surprised he hasn't told you, and I think I'd be able to tell if he told Ron or Luna... Hermione, you remember the last DA meeting, when the mistletoe targeted Luna and Neville? After everyone left, the same thing happened to me and Harry."

"And you *kissed*?" she shrieked and had to cover her mouth. "Oh my God!" She stopped cuddling him to bounce up and down on the bed a bit, cross-legged in her jeans and hoodie, with the bright pink of it making her look carefree and young. Draco pushed her thick hair from her face, and she grabbed his hand and squeezed it in excitement. "Under the mistletoe? So this was recent! You haven't kept it from me for *that* long- how was it?"

All of the weight it had been, admitting all those things he'd thought she would never forgive, and her affection seemed unchanged. And now he had the joy of putting this elation in her eyes, with the unvarnished truth. "I hate to admit it, but honestly... not bad..."

She shrieked louder and sprang on him, hugging him around the shoulders and dragging him to her to cuddle fiercely. "Oh, Draco, I can't believe it! *Finally*!"

"I know you wanted Harry and I to go to the Yule Ball together," Draco acknowledged, and she giggled and shoved at him, the evidence of tears seeming to drain off her face now.

"And I've known he liked you for way longer, even before he probably did. It was so obvious! I've been trying to get him opportunities to speak to you alone since *first* year. Have you kissed him since?" she demanded, "Tell me *everything*," and produced a truly ungodly amount of squealing as he told her the story of kissing at midnight on New Year's, and then making out at length every night since. She looked relieved there had been nothing below the neck, no funny business, but annoyed there had been no commitments or even discussions about what they were doing. "*Boys*!"

"Well, he can't exactly be dying to lock *this* down," Draco drawled, "Since he's the only one practically who *hasn't* been to visit me-"

"Sirius and Remus forbade it, since he was the one who aided and abetted you. He was an enabler, Remus called it. Said you weren't in any shape for lots of visitors, and Harry's punishment was not getting to see you until school starts back up." She stopped, considering. "They don't know, do they? I mean, how would they if Ron and I don't? No, I don't think so."

"You're saying," Draco said dryly, "That they're punishing me far worse than they realize."

"I was going to say they were punishing *Harry* worse," Hermione said, eyeing him with complacent smugness. It was one of Hermione Granger's great pleasures in life, being right about something. "Is it a big punishment, then, Draco?" she teased. "Not having Harry around?"

"Well, it's punishing a part of me- ah, Hermione, no, don't hit me, that pillow is very tough for a convalescent! I meant it's punishing my *heart*-"

"Of course you did," she giggled, and clapped her hands together in glee. "Oh, Draco! You two *should* be together! You're going to have to *officially* figure out what's going on, though, so no one goes in with false expectations and gets hurt-"

"Hermione," Draco cut in, "I will literally never talk to you about this again, if you try and tell me to *talk about our feelings.* Trust me to be the expert on stuff with two *blokes*, okay?"

"Okay," Hermione said, with what looked to be an infinite lack of faith in his expertise in that department. Then her comical dubiousness faltered, turning to real dismay on her worn face. "But Draco- if you have this going on now, how can you still be so reckless? Don't you want to be *more* careful, to be sure you'll have time with him-"

"You don't get *anything*," Draco scolded. "Being with Harry is *why* I did that at Gringotts. If there's anything I can do to protect him or the people he cares about, I'm going to. Maybe I should think more about whether that puts me in danger, but when it comes to Harry, I just don't *think*-"

"And you think Bellatrix Lestrange might break out of Azkaban soon," she said slowly, "And she's your Boggart. And you think she'll be after your wand and that she's a danger to Harry..."

"*No* one is a bigger danger to Harry," Draco said evenly. "But I don't intend to let it get that far. Do you want to hear the worst? Because if you want to be in this, you can't tell people, or I'll never confide in you again. And you can't make me change my mind. You can either help me or not. Look at me. You'll keep it quiet?"

Hermione looked at him, nodding with her eyes full of misgiving, and Draco took a deep breath. "If Aunt Bella gets out of Azkaban, I'm not sitting around waiting for her to come after us. I'm going to hunt her down and kill her myself."

The Black Dagger

Chapter Notes

Playlist

"Grindelwald," Theo said, "I think you need to see this."

Theo had come to visit during lunchtime, carrying not just the food Dobby had packed, but a copy of the January 13th issue of the Daily Prophet with a picture of Aunt Bella on the front.

MASS BREAKOUT FROM AZKABAN

TEN HIGH-SECURITY PRISONERS ESCAPE

There were nine other pictures on the front, all male Death Eaters, but Draco could only stare at Aunt Bella. She was also Theo's object of scrutiny. "Why would you rush to show me this?" Draco asked tiredly. "Couldn't you have just let me sleep as long as I could? I would have been so happy, sleeping without seeing this a little longer."

Theo had to pick up a certain lack of shock, but he had a good habit of not pressing when it could bring no reward. "I wanted to be the one to tell you," he said softly, "Instead of Blaise. I mean, you've already been in bed since we got back from break... I'm not prying, Draco, I'm just..."

"Severus is just being overprotective," Draco sighed, "It's just magical exhaustion, and I should be able to be back in classes in a day or two. And have practice this weekend. We *will* be ready for Ravenclaw, I promise-"

"I'm not asking for Quidditch's sake," Theo said, big dark blue eyes wide with sincerity as he stared down, finally taking the paper out of his sight. It was not ideal that Draco had been forced to take to his sickbed even after their Knight Bus trip to Hogsmeade. He'd had to cancel the first promised Occlumency lesson, and if that had Dumbledore breathing down his neck on top of everything else, running away from Hogwarts was not out of the bloody realm of possibility-

After all, it seemed there were things he had to do outside it. "Theo, if you're looking for me to confide in you, that's not going to happen," Draco said absently, not much thinking about how cold the words came out.

"Do you want me to bring any messages to your Gryffindor friends?" Theo offered, and he must be worried if he was the one to volunteer that.

"There's no point," Draco said, yawning. "Nothing's changed with me, I'm not done being a great Horklump yet. I'm safe in Hogwarts, if they're worried about me, they're being too foolish to-"

"Bellatrix Lestrange was your Boggart," Theo said, touching Draco's face gently, concern vivid on his handsome visage. "None of us have forgotten that, you know. The way you reacted in third year. So if this is you trying to pull a tough act, it's too late-"

"You want to help?" Draco yawned. "Make yourself useful and set me a hot bath running. I'm due one of my infusions." Theo obeyed, and followed him to the bathroom. He poured the offered potion into the water, casting a handy spell to stir it quickly while Draco leaned against the wall waiting. "What?" he asked blearily, once Theo was done and lingered. "Planning to watch?"

Theo didn't redden or grow bashful like Harry would have in his shoes. He masked his embarrassment with a show of quiet solicitousness, though Draco could see his teeth rake over his lower lip. "I was just wondering if you needed any help, but I suppose you'll be fine on your own. See you later, Grindelwald."

Draco cast Theo and his lip-biting out of his mind, but Theo's concern bore unexpected fruit, not that evening but the next. Draco was reclining in his bed, reading the book Hermione had snuck him on wand science without his curtains locked- Severus's express orders, before he was deemed fully recovered. It made it easy for his dormmates to get his attention when they entered in a knot, unusually quiet.

"What?" Draco sighed. "Am I about to get some kind of intervention about all of the blood magic books? Cause all I can say is, like the Muggles, don't hate the player, hate the game..."

"Is that a Muggle saying?" asked a light airy voice too sweet for dungeons.

Draco let out a wordless shriek and sprang forward, almost falling out of bed before Luna could run forward to steady him.

"Oh, Draco, it's so good to see you! I've been worried..."

"COUSIN!" Draco bellowed, and dragged her onto his bed, cuddling her like he had used to cuddle Imoogi. "Boys! Did you all smuggle my cousin in for me?"

Theo nodded, embarrassed. Vince and Greg waved over at Luna, looking flustered to have a pretty girl in their dorm. Luna didn't notice, too busy fussing over Draco trying to fix his bedhead with her fingers. "Oh, Draco, your *hair*, you *must* be feeling terrible..."

"No, it's just that I don't have anyone here to-" *Here to impress*, he almost said. But however much Theo claimed not to like boys, Draco still had enough suspicion of his feelings for that to potentially seem cruel. "Anyone here to care for my beautiful hair the way Luna-Luna

does... I missed you so much..." He cast a look at his dormmates, who were listening unabashedly, then pulled her in, closed the curtains, and cast Inmotus.

Once they were out of sight, Luna reached into her bag and began to produce items. "Look, I have the map and the cloak," she said brightly. "I'm the official ambassador. We all think Snape hates me the least in case he catches us... Theo went and talked to Ron about how you were worried about the Death Eater breakout, isn't it awful-"

"I wasn't worried," Draco mumbled, but she went on unhindered.

"We'll miss you at the DA meeting tomorrow- it will be tense after the news in the Prophet-"

"How is Neville doing with it?" Draco interrupted, genuinely curious, and she frowned.

"Oh, *I* don't know," she said, as if she was no special friend or confidant. Draco inwardly winced for him. "Anyway, you've told Hermione about the Naufragiam? It is rather a relief not to have to hide that from her anymore, though she was a bit peeved at me. She asked for-"

"Luna, you should talk to Neville about it," Draco insisted, and she shrugged uncomfortably.

"I haven't been alone with him since, well, the mistletoe," Luna said, fidgeting. "I wouldn't know where to begin... maybe Hermione can speak to him..."

"You know if he tells Hermione all his emotions," Draco drawled, "He might start fancying her, she's very pretty, she's his age, in Gryffindor and all- if he doesn't fancy her a little already..."

"You think?" Luna said, lower lip sticking out in a cute pout.

"Do you fancy Neville back or not?" Draco said bluntly, and Luna's eyes went huge.

"I don't know!" she cried, before seeming to process. "What do you mean *back*- Frankenstein, I've told you so many times, Neville doesn't fancy me, he just wants to be friends-" Draco wished he had some heavy object to whack her or Neville with, preferably both. "And I'm not here to talk about *Neville*, I'm here to talk about your aunt. I was there with you last year, remember, in the maze..."

Draco shut his eyes at the memory of his utter failure with the Boggart, which had forced his little cousin to face off with Tom bloody Riddle instead. "I wish that could just be magically blotted from your memory- no, don't worry, Luna, I'm not going to Obliviate you..."

"I wasn't reaching for my wand," Luna explained, and pulled out a crumpled-up note. "This is from Hermione, she told me not to read it because it was cursed. So I read it and it says..."

"LUNA!"

"I could tell she was bluffing," Luna said reasonably, "And look, I don't *seem* to be cursed." Draco hugged her around the middle, resting his chin on her shoulder. She took his affection with a smile, though when she unfolded the note, she had a contemplative look. "Shall I read it to you?"

"Go ahead," Draco mumbled.

"'Dear Frankenstein,'" Luna read, "'You must have seen by now that what you feared has come to pass. I haven't told anyone what we talked about concerning your aunt. There are just two things I wish I could look you in the eye to make you promise me. That you don't do anything until your godfather thinks your magical strength is completely recovered, and that you don't do anything or leave Hogwarts without telling me first. Tell Luna you promise and that will be good enough for me. Love, Striker.'" She reached back and patted his head. "Hermione couldn't possibly think you're planning to leave Hogwarts and go after Bellatrix Lestrange, could she?"

Draco peeled back to read her expression. As improbable as it would have been on anyone else, she looked as blissful as she always did, at the prospect of some harebrained scheme she was about to be imperiled by, dragged in by the world's most high-maintenance cousin. "Luna, how would you feel about joining me in a new project?"

"Oh, yes!" she enthused. "Are we going to go try and kill your aunt? That sounds very dangerous." She couldn't have sounded happier to say so. "Will this involve another blood magic ritual? Oh, I hope so. The last one was so fun."

His first day back in the world brought news of Hagrid, and nothing good: namely, that he had more injuries, and official probation. Draco knew all would be well on both fronts, so had to feign concern. He did hope Hagrid wouldn't be too anxious. He went to visit him and Imoogi after Transfiguration that afternoon. Hagrid looked an absolute mess, but he was happy enough to make some tea and chat.

Draco told him not to worry about their additional lessons, that he would be fine for OWLs after the ones they'd had. Hagrid made a show of sadness, but he looked relieved in the eyes, especially once Draco promised to bring Luna and visit him on weekends anyway just to chat. With Umbridge's new educational decree, that teachers could not give out information not expressly related to their lessons, it was too much risk. Even if the student involved hadn't been Umbridge's favorite person in the world, Draco Malfoy.

His mind was on Umbridge as he sat down at dinner that night, a rather hilarious miscalculation of threat levels. He was soon dragged back to the real darkness on the horizon, by the animal that flew overhead to hover malevolently for at least thirty whole seconds before dropping a letter. It would have seemed an Augurey, were it not pitch-black, eyes, beak, everything. Maybe a dyed or enchanted Augurey. It matched the package it dropped right before Draco, before it raced as far as it could from the object in a great flash of dark rings. The package could not properly be called a letter, actually: a scroll at best, a small one, tied with black twine to the roughly cut flare of the quillion on an unpolished obsidian dagger. There was carving on the side of the hilt, right over the cannelure, in deep letters that read DRACO LUCIUS MALFOY.

"Oh, shit," Blaise said, after the whole Slytherin table had quieted, grabbed Pansy's hand, and pulled her bodily away from the table.

"Protego horribilis," Draco called reflexively before the dagger moved- but it was just from the scroll, which had the seal of House Black closing it in black wax, split open on its own. Like Blaise, Draco thought he knew what this was, but he had never actually seen a Black Dagger. He had thought they were like many of Father's stories, old traditions that never happened even in their exclusive pureblood circle anymore.

"What's that?" Daphne asked, and Millie grabbed the nearby girls and hauled them to safety, then Vince and Greg too, huffing in exasperation. When she tried to pull Theo, though, he wouldn't budge.

"I think it's a Black Dagger," Millie said nervously. "It's some old pureblood thing- look, it's real obsidian, I think- it's a demand, or a declaration of blood feud, or blood feud if you don't meet the demand- it's called *Formal Enmity*- I didn't think anyone had sent one for centuries, the obsidian has to be sharpened on the bones of the slain or something... Theo, come on, this isn't for you..."

Draco should have been pushing Theo from his side. But he was staring transfixed at the words the scroll unveiled, rolling down agonizingly slowly.

There were steps coming from the high table, Severus's voice yelling something, but Draco had his shield up, and had to see what it said. Written in jagged, scratch-like handwriting instantly recognizable, the ink looked to be blood, just as in tradition:

Forfeit all you stole by the full moon midnight

in the place you first stole

or FORFEIT ALL YOU OWN

Forfeit the wand OR FORFEIT YOUR HANDS

Forfeit the gold OR FORFEIT YOUR BLOOD

Forfeit the cup OR FORFEIT YOUR FRIENDS

Forfeit all you stole OR FORFEIT ALL YOU LOVE

THIEF

BLOOD TRAITOR

LIAR

"Draco!" Severus yelled, running forward, but it was too late. The dagger surged forward, point launched at Draco before it rebounded off the shield and almost fell on Theo-

"Protego horribilis!" Severus called, shielding Theo just in time. With the Great Hall fallen in silence, the three of them watched behind shields as the dagger fell instead with implacable fury onto the gleaming hard wood of the Slytherin table, and carved the words there instead of Draco's flesh where they had been meant to fall:

THIEF, BLOOD TRAITOR, LIAR.

The scroll evaporated in a pulse of dark acrid smoke, before the dagger fell still. And just like that, only the smoke and dagger remained, and all of the eyes and the silence.

Draco could not afford the silence, at least not from himself. "Well," Draco said, purportedly to Theo, but loud enough to be sure the entire hall heard him. "Better late than never, to get a Christmas present from your favorite aunt. I'll have to send her a snow globe."

The bad news was, the words didn't seem to be coming out of the wood anytime soon, despite a number of attempts by both students and professors. The good news was, it gave Draco his own seat at Slytherin. For some reason, no one else seemed to want to sit there.

Draco sat at the back of the greenhouse and then the classrooms drifting off for the day, which hardly boded well for his OWL prospects. But he'd taken all three before, though he'd only gotten Es in Herbology and History of Magic. But he'd gotten an O in Defense, and Umbridge's classes were boring enough recitations of facts that he was without fear of missing anything important. Nor had she seemed to recover enough from her fear of him to dare disturb him. Her pink lace gloves still never left her hands.

The only surprise in Defense came at the end, when a hand seized him by the arm to drag him around the corner once he emerged. Draco didn't even try to struggle. He recognized the hand and its grip already. "Hey, Harry," he drawled, trying not to look pleased to see that handsome anxious face insert itself in his vision. "You shouldn't let Umbridge see you hanging around. I'm not exactly her favorite. And she's not scared of *you*-"

"I haven't seen you," Harry said softly, "In nearly two weeks," and didn't let his arm go.

Heat swam through Draco's gut, stifling at the thought of what that might mean Harry had been missing. "So you've tracked me down," he intoned, "To drag me off like a Neanderthal?"

Harry's green eyes flashed, too full of life to register any shame. "Pretty much, yeah," he said bluntly. "We need to talk. Seventh floor?"

"I don't know if I *should* resist," Draco whispered. "Depends on what you're planning to do once you've got me alone-"

"Draco, are you alright?" Theo appeared from around the corner. Draco should have been grateful for the show of concern, but he couldn't recall ever wanting to curse Theo more, even in the blue loop. That included when Theo had fucked him three times in a row and then told him he never wanted to see him again.

"I'm fine," Draco said tightly, and put a hand to Harry's mouth to physically forestall an angry response. If all the touch he was seeing made Theo suspicious, well, Theo was sharp enough to have picked up all about Sirius and Remus. Who was to say he hadn't figured it out about Draco and Harry already anyway? "Hush-hush do-gooder business."

"Fine," Theo said, but stayed until Draco used Harry's grip to lead him off to the nearest staircase and out of sight. Harry stared back as the staircase moved agonizingly slowly, watching Theo watching them.

"Before you start raging," Draco warned, "You might want to consider how things look from the outside, manhandling the poor bloke's convalescing Quidditch captain so soon before we play Ravenclaw-"

"What?" Harry let go of him to rake a hand through his hair. "That wasn't about Quidditch and we both know it. Not that Nott is good enough to be on your team to begin with-"

"Harry," Draco said, stepping closer on the next staircase with no one in immediate eyesight. "Do you really think you need to be jealous of Theo anymore?"

Harry's hands spasmed at his sides, like it was a struggle not to grab Draco again right away. "You tell me, Malfoy."

"Oh, Malfoy, is it?" Draco laughed, and made the Room open to their Occlumency set-up. "Is that the way to ask me for the Occlumency lesson we missed? I assume that's why you wanted to go here, though it's been a hell of a week-"

"Sirius and Remus wouldn't let me see you," Harry said, beginning to pace in agitation, "And you were still on bed rest even after we got back, and then there was that dagger... a *declaration of formal enmity*... Draco, what did we *do*?"

It seemed Harry had not dragged him off to kiss his face off after all. "It would have been coming anyway. Aunt Bella's wand is more than enough for that, whatever we took. What's important is we found the Longbottoms' wands... did you just want to fret at me like Hermione?"

"Everyone said I'm an enabler," Harry said miserably, "For your bad behavior, after we went to Gringotts. Hermione said I don't question you enough. That I let you get away with so much, just because I..." The next time he paced by Draco in the small room, Draco pressed him down into the red armchair. Harry let out a soft oof, and then exhaled more sharply when Draco seized his shoulders to keep him there, leaning over with green firelight swimming over both of them. "Draco, what are you..."

"Because you *what*, Harry?" Draco laughed. "Why *do* you let me get away with things?" He tugged Harry's Gryffindor tie out of place, winding it around his hand. "You're not even mad

at me, admit it. You just wanted an excuse for us to be alone. And now we are. What are you going to do about it?" He pulled off Harry's glasses and put them aside on the mantelpiece, as if Harry needed him to be any more obvious. "It's not been two weeks. It's been exactly twelve days. I counted."

Harry's hands went to Draco's waist, but pulled back once he realized. Draco scowled at the loss, then shrugged off his robe to leave himself in his uniform, getting it out of the way before pulling Harry's hands back where they had been. "Twelve days and you want to *talk*? I missed you too. Do you know *what* I missed?"

"We should..." Harry licked his lips when Draco undid his tie completely. "What are you going to do about the threat? I wanted to make sure you weren't scared..."

"Cut it with the savior complex. Do I look scared to you? You're the scared one." He straddled Harry. The feeling of hands tightening on his waist to keep him balanced made his entire body tense for a glorious moment, awareness less of thought than sensation, of the configurations their bodies could take.

Harry seemed unprepared for Draco on his lap. His hands tightened on Draco's waist. "I'm not scared," Harry said, and Draco pouted at him needily.

"We haven't seen each other," Draco whined, "For twelve days. Did you not like it back at Grimmauld when we were kissing?" He put his own hands in Harry's hair and swayed forward playfully, acting like he was going to kiss Harry before pulling back. "I must have misread the situation. I could have sworn that you enjoyed it... do you not want to do it again?" Draco felt his own pout deepen, voice going brattier. "Because as *I* recall, you needed the practice..."

"You're not as good at manipulating people as you think you are, Draco," Harry said sharply, and kept him at arm's length.

He's already gotten bored of me. He got what he wanted, and then not seeing me this long has let him sort out his head and get it straight. I'm just embarrassing myself now. "If that's true," Draco whispered, affecting a confidence he didn't feel, "Then why are you letting me get on top of you?"

Harry's gorgeous eyes darkened before he seemed to make himself look away. "I can't help the effect you have on me, you're *evil*..."

"Sounds like I'm pretty good at manipulating *you* at least," Draco said cockily, and pushed his hair out of his eyes before touching Harry's mouth. Harry's lips parted, breath rapid against his fingers. "Stop trying to be virtuous, Saint Potter. I'm saying *I* liked kissing you, you useless prat..."

"What are you going to do about your aunt?" Harry pressed, and Draco leaned in and stole a kiss off Harry's pretty mouth before Harry could stop him.

"I'm going to hunt her down and kill her," Draco said, and Harry laughed unsteadily.

"Don't joke," he said, staring at Draco's mouth.

"Ask Hermione or Luna," Draco said nonchalantly, "They know it's the plan. There, are you happy, I've confided in you... are you horrified? Do you want me to go back to my own chair?"

"No," Harry said immediately, "Stay," and his hands slid down to grip at Draco's hips.

Draco felt a painful tug not just at his gut but his chest, not just arousal but connection, and the connection was stronger than he would have liked, too strong to just bury under the arousal and pretend it didn't exist at all. He'd imagined this would be like sneaking around with Theo, except the balance was all off. He hadn't had to *feel* things with Theo at first, but with Harry, there always had to be a meaning behind touching, other than the fact that it just felt good. It was that meaning that pressed at the corners of his awareness, threatening to ruin everything.

"I can't get you out of my head," Harry confessed in a rush, "Ever. Even though I never have any idea what's going on in yours. All I do is worry about you or wonder about what you're doing or who you're talking to... it doesn't matter where I am or what I'm doing, I'd rather be with you..."

"Good," Draco whispered, forehead pressing to Harry's. "*Good*. My evil plan is *working*."

"You are so full of it," Harry laughed breathily, and Draco bit his lip. His teeth grazed Harry's lip with the motion, and Harry shuddered. "Just... don't go putting yourself into danger without me. Promise." Draco nodded and pressed another kiss to Harry's mouth. Harry let out a groan and kissed him back for a long moment before forcing their faces apart. "You really promise?"

"Yes, you great blunderbus, I promise," Draco said, rolling his eyes, and Harry kissed him so hard his head spun with it. Harry still had a lot to learn when it came to technique, but when it came to aggression, no one could match him. No one had ever kissed Draco like Harry did, like he was casting Legilimens with it and trying to force his way into Draco's head. "Calm down, Harry, stop trying to eat my face off..."

"I can try and eat your face off if I like," Harry mumbled against his mouth, nipping at his lower lip playfully, and Draco's heart spasmed again. He *hated* the way that felt, like this just had to take him over, not just his senses but his self. He couldn't be at a remove with this, not with Harry, and nearly two weeks of distance hadn't made that any less true.

"Just do what I do. Really, I'm doing the world a public service, keeping the Chosen One from kissing like a rapid wildebeest... *mmm*... bloody hell..." he murmured into Harry's mouth as the tip of Harry's tongue slid along his, sending tingling little purrs of sensation down his spine. Complain as Draco did, Harry was a natural at this too.

Harry imitated what Draco did, with more enthusiasm. There seemed to be a natural tendency in him to apply pressure, to try to take the lead and dominate the kiss. It just made Draco feel even needier, like he should never have let himself be alone with Harry. Once he started, it

was too hard to stop, too explosive where their bodies touched. Harry's hands slipped down from Draco's hips to cup his arse, and Draco whimpered against his mouth.

"Sorry," Harry gasped, hands pulling back, and Draco shook his head.

"Go ahead," Draco gasped, nuzzling at Harry's hair and pressing his face there to try and steady himself. It helped more to press a kiss to one of Harry's little seashell-like ears, pale in the mess of tousled, wild dark hair, lobes tender and easy to imprint under Draco's teeth. "Touch me there if you want..." *Touch me* anywhere *you want.*

Harry grabbed Draco's arse again, nosing Draco's face back right to his. He pushed his tongue into Draco's mouth, hands kneading in exploration, like he was trying to learn the feel of Draco under his fingers. Draco moaned, returning the kiss and letting Harry's tongue slide along his teeth, along the roof of his mouth where the Langlock would trap him, every square centimeter like he was claiming it for himself...

Very few words were exchanged then, until the alarm on Draco's watch went off, telling him it was high time they go down for dinner.

"Come on," Draco said, trying to get up, "They'll already have missed us in the library," and Harry's hands kept stubborn hold of him, making him rock back against him. He grabbed onto Harry's chest, two handfuls of his robes to steady himself. The liquid look in Harry's green eyes made him feel like he was melting too. "Let me go, you illiterate brute..."

"I really planned for us to *talk*," he said miserably, and Draco arched an eyebrow. "Fine, fine," Harry sighed, but his eyes ate up every inch of Draco's body he could see, before Draco pulled his robes back on over his uniform.

"Draco! I need your help!"

Draco looked up from his cup of tea to see Neville had invaded Hagrid's hut. "Afternoon," he said equably, and Neville's chest heaved for breath, looking as if he'd sprinted the whole way out of the castle. "Hagrid, is there tea and cake enough for four?"

"Four- oh, erm, hello, Luna," Neville breathed, turning red from more than just exertion. "I- oh, no, I'm interrupting, aren't I- I'm really sorry to interrupt..."

"Don' yeh worry, Neville, we ain't ones to stand on ceremony, eh?" Hagrid said kindly.

"Draco is right, please have a cup of tea with us," Luna offered, and then frowned. "Are you in trouble, Neville? Can we help you?"

"No, just- Draco," Neville panted, and Draco rose to his feet.

"Alright, my presence is urgently requested," he sighed theatrically. "Hagrid, Luna, always a pleasure. Neville, you're lucky you're my favorite Gryffindor..."

"Bye, Neville!" Luna called brightly, and Neville grabbed Draco and practically sprinted away from her smiling face.

"Neville, my cousin hasn't suddenly contracted rabies-"

"You shouldn't call me that anymore- you know, your favorite Gryffindor. I mean, I know it's a joke, but still- with you and Harry-"

"What?" Draco breathed, steps faltering. "What are you talking about?"

Neville chewed on his lower lip. "Here, come on, I don't want to keep your godfather waiting too much... he sent someone to get me, I couldn't face going to meet him alone... Draco, listen, it's not like it's not obvious, that you are Harry are, you know, involved now..."

"Ssh!" Draco hissed, as they reached the steps to the entrance hall. "Wait, what do you mean, it's obvious? It's only just happened! I've only told Hermione! Did she say something? Did Harry?"

"No, but, er," Neville's cheeks went even redder than they had already been from running into Luna. "Draco, you kind of left, er, this bite mark on Harry's ear... Ron and I noticed it in the dorms last night... don't worry, Dean and Seamus weren't around. Ron figured out how to spell it away, but he guessed right away who'd left it. Harry didn't tell him, but Ron was sure. Don't worry, Ron's not mad at you, he was really excited for you two- and so am I, Draco, I'm really glad it's finally happened! Though Harry wouldn't tell us much..."

"There's not much to tell," Draco said heavily, "Which is why you won't go telling anyone, will you, Neville? I'll tell Luna, but we should just keep it between these people." He felt the cool of the dungeons as they began to descend the stairs, but it was a reminder of the strength of his attachment to Severus, Severus who he had admitted he liked Harry to long before anyone else... "I don't want my godfather to know, or any of the professors, and definitely not my uncle and Remus. Let alone if it gets out in the papers. In case you haven't noticed, being publicly associated with me is like painting a target on your forehead..."

"I wouldn't tell!" Neville protested. "You never said anything about my parents to anyone..."

And Draco was an awful friend. "It said in that article, didn't it, in the Prophet? About your parents," he asked grimly, finally remembering, and Neville nodded.

"It's different, though, people knowing, now that they've recovered," he said, and stopped outside Severus's office. "I know you're sick of me saying thank you, but you have to let me say it one more time-"

"Nope!" Draco said brightly. "I don't! Severus, we're here!"

He pushed the door to the office open, and Severus looked up from a pile of essays at his desk with a dour expression. "'*We're* here'- oh, of course my burdensome godson has invited himself along with Longbottom. Thus the delay." Neville looked guilty, but Draco shot him a look, stopping him from admitting he'd dragged Draco for security. "You might as well come in. Longbottom!"

"Yes?" Neville cried, instantly snapping to attention at that bark that so terrified him.

"Here," Severus said, gesturing to the essays, and Draco and Neville stared blankly. "No, look here," he said, and pulled the essays out of the way. There were two wands sitting on the desk beside them. "Do you recognize these?"

"No," said Neville, in a soft, fragile voice that made Draco glad he'd come along. "Are those... are those my parents' wands?"

"I have tested them exhaustively," Severus said impatiently, "And determined there is no tracking, curses, or any other external magic attached to them. For various reasons, it would not be ideal for me to send or transport them to your parents personally. I leave it to you. Take them." He produced two plain wooden wand cases, and put them away with economical motions. Then he shoved them across the desk, and Draco had to be the one to pick them up for Neville and shove them in his robe pockets.

"Thank you, sir," Neville said slowly, so unused to getting any kind of good news from Severus, it seemed his mind had stopped functioning. "That's, er, thank you so much... it hasn't been easy since they got their memories back, but with their old wands, my parents..."

"Did I request your life story, Longbottom?" Severus snarled. "OUT!" Draco began to walk out with Neville before Severus's voice stopped them. "Go send them, Longbottom. If you require emotional counseling for this sensitive event, find it elsewhere. My burdensome godson is staying."

"Yes, sir!" Neville yelped, and nearly fell over his own feet from running out so fast.

Draco expected to be called up on his brave talk of pursuing Aunt Bella, his secretly altered relationship with Harry Potter, or perhaps something even more worthy of Severus's ire that he couldn't think of yet. But instead, Severus just leveled an emotionless gaze on him and intoned, "You will spend the sixth of February under surveillance. The *full moon*," he went on at Draco's look of incomprehension. "Have you decided whether you will answer Bellatrix's challenge?"

"No," Draco admitted, knowing better than to act like he wasn't considering it.

"You will *not*. I read the letter before it went up in smoke," Severus said curtly, "And I immediately knew that your family was plotting to take advantage of your penchant for impulsiveness, by luring you into a trap at Malfoy Manor. The wards will be down to you that night, and your aunt will await you. But so will your father and many others, and they will not be expecting you to come cede your ill-gotten gains. They will expect you to be looking for a fight, perhaps dragging some of your impressionable friends along. If you go, you *will* be killed. Or worse. Far, *far* worse."

"Is this a guess, Severus," Draco said slowly, "Or something you know?"

Severus glared at him before leaning back in his chair, letting more of his dank black hair fall in his sallow face. It was not enough to keep Draco from finally noticing the dark circles

under Severus's eyes that no spell could fully banish, nor the pained hunch to his shoulders or the tremor of his hands, with slight dark moons under some of his fingernails.

"I was summoned by the Dark Mark," Severus said expressionlessly, "To the Dark Lord last night. The plan for you is quite clear. You will be lured to the Manor, and you will either join, taking the Dark Mark that very night, or else you will be made an example of, and the Dark Lord will end you if necessary. Although he would prefer to take you in hand *personally*, to render you... pliable... by his own means. But you would *not* be returning to Hogwarts, ever again. Your actions at Gringotts alongside *Harry Potter* ended any indulgence for you past that. I have been instructed, of course, to urge you and ease the way for you to attend-"

"Will you be blamed if I *don't* come, though?" Draco exclaimed in sudden fear, grabbing onto the edge of Severus's desk. Severus gestured for Draco to sit down, and Draco ignored it.

"I have already been held accountable," Severus said dryly, "For your actions. Do not fear for the future."

"Severus, you... you were punished, weren't you? For what I did? The after-effects... the color of your eyes, your ears, the base of your nails... *Cruciatus*..."

"You are very familiar with the Cruciatus curse and its effects," Severus intoned.

But there was no heart in Severus's words, and Draco could read in that instant how much of his usual spirit had been tortured out of him. "*Fuck*," Draco exclaimed, hands flying to his mouth. "This is my *fault*. If I hadn't- and now *you're* the one punished..." Why hadn't he thought those monsters would hold Draco's godfather accountable for his defiance? They'd held his mother's life over his head from beginning to end in the blue loop. And Severus was the one he was closest to now, and they had him in their clutches too. "No... Severus, did Aunt Bella do it to you? Tell me she wasn't the one to... or the Dark Lord, or both... *no*..." He began to breathe hard, tears instantly springing to his eyes and leaking down as the memory of Aunt Bella's Cruciatus swept through him, aftershocks spasming at his fingertips. "No, no, no, no..."

"Draco, *calm down,*" Severus said sharply, but it was too late. Draco was hyperventilating, with a panic attack like he hadn't had for so many months, even once Severus forced potion after potion and then tea on him, even after attempts at breathing exercises and sitting down on the floor of Severus's office leaning against the wall. His chest went useless with fear as the memory of Aunt Bella and her Cruciatus swept through him, like aftershocks of the spell rebounding on himself.

"Trust this dramatic boy," Severus sighed, taking a seat beside him, "To have one of his respiratory fits when his *godfather* was the one affected." Draco did not respond to that as he had seemed to hope, no defiance, just buried his face in his knees, wracking up and down with sobs. "You are overreacting. I am perfectly fine. Do you think I have never been tortured by the Dark Lord or his followers before? An occupational hazard of the spy, a common one..."

"But it was because of me!" Draco gasped, looking up at him with his ears too bleary with tears to make out any of the sallow black blur clearly. "I was afraid of this from the second I

heard you were going back as a spy... I *knew* it, I *knew* I would ruin things for you... I knew I would make you suffer, get you *killed*- you're going to die and it will be all my fault..."

Severus could have pointed out now how these were the wages of Draco's recklessness, of acting unilaterally like he had at Gringotts. Draco had thought he was making the people he cared about safer, but now- and risking himself was one thing, but *Severus*- Severus, who somehow had the grace not to throw this in his face, just pat him bleakly on the shoulder and sit beside him on his own office floor, indulging his useless godson, after Draco had the temerity to not only risk his godfather's life but have a bloody fit about it...

"Draco," Severus said softly, "Listen to me. I will say this only once. *You* are not the reason I am a spy, so do not be so self-important as to take the blame upon yourself. The fault is my own, for choices I made before you were ever born." Severus gripped Draco's shoulder until he looked at him, though he had to wipe his eyes to see Severus through the tears at all. "*I* put myself in this position. I chose to take *this*. You did not put this on my arm."

He pulled his sleeve up to show his Dark Mark, as lurid and dark and angry as Draco's own had ever looked. "And *I* chose to change sides back. That was not your decision either. If I suffer as a Death Eater, if I *die*, that will not be your fault, Draco-"

"YOU ARE NOT GOING TO DIE!" Draco screamed, and shoved him so hard he slipped back, thudding against the wall with a dull gasp. "I- no, oh, Severus, I'm sorry..."

Severus pulled himself back up, and looked pleased if anything to hear how Draco's breathing had finally began to slow, though the panic sometimes came in fits and spurts. "You," Severus said coolly, "Are in far worse shape than I. You will need a double round of angel's infusions if you are to even think of holding Quidditch practice tonight as planned. As you certainly must, if you are to stand a chance of beating Ravenclaw heftily enough to stay in the race for the cup. Now off with you. Worry after yourself, Draco. I have faced worse. I *will* face worse in the war to come-"

"You won't," Draco insisted stubbornly, hopelessly. "I won't let you. You need to stop being a spy. I'll go to Dumbledore-"

"You will do no such thing," Severus snarled. "For once, you will do as you are told. OUT!"

Draco,

You have received a declaration of formal enmity. You will have seen the demands it entails to have this enmity reversed. Should it not be reversed, there will be things that even a father cannot protect you from.

I have fought as hard as I can to shield you from the consequences of your actions. Come where you have been summoned, on the day you have been summoned there. Come with a repentant heart, and I will welcome you back with open arms. Your mother will welcome you. Your mother's family will welcome you. The one we serve will welcome you. If you

arrive with the instructions obeyed, ready to kneel before those you should rightly serve, and beg for mercy, I guarantee you that mercy will be granted.

You are so powerful, my precocious boy. You have a mind of your own, and that is not a bad thing in itself. It is better than having no mind at all, like some of your friends at Hogwarts. But you have listened to the wrong people, and gotten ideas in your head that will not serve you in life. The world is going in one and only one direction. You ensured that yourself on the night of the graveyard. The wheel of fate is set into motion, and there is no stopping it. There is no opposing it in its path. It will move. I believe my son is clever enough to understand that there is no real choice but to move with it. There has never been a choice, and there is certainly none now. Come back to me and join me in this path, or step in front of it and be crushed beneath.

I would not see you crushed, Draco. Whatever has passed between us, you are still my son.

Lucius Abraxas Malfoy

"You see why I didn't want any of you to have to read that?" Draco said wryly, once Hermione had lowered his father's letter about Bellatrix, voice going quiet. "Now I've ruined Dobby's birthday party."

The Room of Requirement was strewn with food, pillows, balloons, steamers, and the black marks left on the ground by the twins' fireworks. The twins, Ginny, Wooky, and Nissy had all filtered out, leaving the six of them alone with Dobby for Draco to fulfill his promise. And he had reluctantly handed over his father's letter, delivered so prominently by the eagle owl that morning, for Hermione to read them all. Her voice was choked with fear before she was done.

"You know that's all bullshit, right?" Ron said, scowling. "They wouldn't forgive you."

"Draco Malfoy must not go back to Lucius Malfoy!" Dobby exclaimed, hands waving in panic, his African turquoise watch catching the gold glow of the hanging lanterns. All of the joy from the pile of presents before him seemed to have dissipated, in face of the cold splash of reality that the letter had brought into the party. "Lucius Malfoy is not a good man! He will hurt Draco Malfoy! He will..." Dobby took a deep breath, eyes filling with tears. "He will punish Draco Malfoy too much! Draco Malfoy will not survive it!"

"We're not letting him go, Dobby, don't worry," Harry said firmly, and shot Draco a look that made his determination crystal clear. Draco tried not to lose his train of thought at the intensity of the protectiveness on that perfect face.

"I'm not," Draco said grimly. "I already promised Severus, alright? And yes, I haven't made it a secret, I don't intend to wait around like a sitting duck for my aunt to get me, I want to take the fight *to* her-" Neville made a shocked sound, the only one who it seemed hadn't been told this, but Draco ignored him. "But not on enemy territory, I'm not that stupid. I'm not just going to walk into a trap like that. When I face her- when *we* face her," he added, at the look

Hermione gave him, "It will be on our own terms, not theirs. And I promise, I won't be alone."

"What can they do to you if you don't come?" Luna asked anxiously, clinging onto his side.

"I don't know," Draco admitted, "I know they have all kinds of mysterious and dark magic, but so do I!" It was a sign of how well the other six people in the room knew him, that none of them so much as blinked at that assertion. "And as long as we're at Hogwarts, we're under Dumbledore's protection. I'm more worried about what will happen to *Severus* if I don't go. That's the one thing that makes me... I don't know, hopefully they'll just torture him a lot..."

That held up proceedings a while, as Neville had also not known that Severus was working as a spy for the Order, nor had any of them but Draco known the toll that was exacting on him. "I don't know, Neville," Draco said doubtfully once they were done. "We're trusting you with a lot of information here. Heavy stuff. You don't have to be here for this..."

"Draco, do you think that after what you did for my parents, if you're in trouble, I would ever abandon you?" Neville seemed to steel himself. "And you're my friend, Draco. If... if it's to protect my friends, I can be brave."

Luna smiled at Neville, soft and admiring. The look they exchanged then was one Draco felt like an intruder to be witnessing.

"Well," Draco said, clearing his throat and looking away. "I'm not sending my father a letter back. Dobby, has that spoiled the festive mood completely, or are you ready for another Butterbeer?"

"Dobby is always ready for another Butterbeer," Dobby said earnestly, and they all sat back against the cushions for a much-needed drink.

Slytherin Quidditch practice resumed, DA meetings resumed, and Occlumency lessons with Harry resumed as well, filling in slots in Draco's busy schedule to keep his mind occupied most of the time. By far the most pressing thought on his mind, though, even over the danger to Severus and the deadline approaching past which he would formally be Bellatrix Lestrange's enemy, was Harry Potter. Harry had complained about thinking of Draco too much, but he couldn't possibly be thinking of him, dreaming of him, as much as he had come to dominate *Draco's* mind.

It's the honeymoon period or whatever, he told himself all the time, *Just the early rush of messing around with someone. It's natural to get obsessed with them physically like this. There's even a word for it.* Limerence. *And limerence is by definition ephemeral.*

He and Harry still hadn't had what Hermione called *the talk*, that pesky *what are we* discussion, that would have to try and figure this out beyond *friends who like to kiss each other all the time.* It would be one thing if Harry forced the issue, but he hadn't, and Draco was going to put it off as long as he humanly could. The only intimations of it came when Harry made grumblings of jealousy about Theo, which Draco could easily silence now, by

proof of the physical claim Harry had on him. And Draco did enjoy proving that, as Harry learned how to kiss properly, and how Draco liked to be kissed. For once, that Gryffindor stubbornness was being applied to something very, very useful for Draco and Draco only.

It had *better* be Draco only. The altruistic conclusion he was meant to cede Harry gracefully to Ginny Weasley or the like was a distant memory. And Harry, unlike Draco, had the grace not to make Draco jealous. If he ever had, Draco wouldn't have thrown punches, just curses...

They didn't talk about it. Their friends knew, but they kept it secret from the school and the teachers. At least, Draco thought they managed that. If Harry stared at Draco a lot these days, well, it wasn't like that was exactly new. If Harry spent a little more time lurking around Luna and Draco during DA sessions, offering unnecessary advice, well, he'd always made excuses to hang around Draco. And if Draco spent pretty much every Defense class, from start to finish, daydreaming about going off to the Room of Requirement after and kissing Harry's face off after, well, he'd spent a great number of Defense classes doing that already anyway.

It was appalling selfishness, but it was hard to feel too bad about it, when not only he but Harry seemed happier than he had ever seen him in either timeline. Harry positively glowed every time Draco was in the vicinity, and *wherever* they were, it had Draco hyper-aware of every inch of himself, everywhere on him that Harry had and would touch. Which was singularly inconvenient during Potions, but Draco managed to master himself better in that class than any other time, through sheer fear and respect for Severus. If Harry couldn't... well, unfortunately, much to Severus's undoubted sorrow, it wasn't like Harry hadn't ever spent entire Potions classes doing things to Draco with his eyes before.

Harry was with Draco the night of the full moon, when the time came and passed for Draco to answer Bellatrix's summons. Severus's initial resolve to have Draco watched from day to night had faded, as he'd come to realize Draco was in earnest about not falling for the trap. Hermione had made sure of that through sheer nagging. And it was always easy enough to get Severus to let Draco go off with Harry to the Room of Requirement, even after hours, for Dumbledore's 'Occlumency lessons'. Which they *were* making actual progress in, despite not always exactly... staying on task. Harry hadn't had any flashes or even odd dreams since the surge of overwhelming happiness he'd experienced at the Death Eater escape. Nor did he experience any surge of rage as he and Draco stayed put on the red armchair. Which he might well have felt, at the summoned blood traitor not cooperating, unless this planned aunt-nephew bonding was just an extracurricular venture of Aunt Bella's.

"Well, my wand hasn't caught on fire in my pocket and burned us both to death," Draco observed. He regretted his snarkiness at the images that put in his head, him and Harry facing a fire in the Room of Requirement. He stared into the lit fire, burning its green color into his eyes instead of the orange of Fiendfyre, until he saw Harry make a face in his peripheral vision.

"Was that a possibility?" Harry complained. Draco just leaned his head against the velvet of the chair, perched on the arm like he tended to be when not actively plastered all over Harry. He had trouble staying in his own chair when it came to this boy. That Slytherin-green chair must be developing an inferiority complex at how little use it got. "You don't tell me *anything*-"

"No, that was a joke, you great Horklump," Draco sighed, and pivoted on the chair's arm to poke at Harry's scar. "You need to get better at reading me if we're going to keep at this..."

"'This'?" Harry echoed, and knocked one of Draco's feet with his. Draco always took off his shoes in here, but Harry kept his on. Draco made a face at the knock of Harry's old rough shoe.

"This," Draco agreed softly, and ran his sock foot up Harry's calf. Harry's hand reached out and grabbed Draco's foot. "Brute," Draco hissed, staring down through his eyelashes, and Harry rolled his eyes, taking his glasses and putting them aside on the mantelpiece. Merlin was Draco pathetic, but his body knew what *that* meant...

"*Illiterate* brute, that's what it usually is," Harry laughed. "Have I learned how to read since you last checked?" He kept hold of Draco's left foot, and grabbed the other when Draco poked him with it. Draco fell onto Harry's lap and kissed him with senseless adoration, attacking Harry's mouth with all the anxiety he hadn't been letting himself feel over the date that was passing.

"No," Draco gasped, "You'll always be illiterate. At least when it comes to me."

Harry bit his lower lip, tugging it out enough to make Draco whimper, squirming brattily on his lap. "Then teach me," Harry whispered, "And stop *wriggling* like that..."

"You love it," Draco teased.

"I love *you*," Harry said without thinking, and then his face froze. "I mean- God, Draco, I'm sorry..."

"Just kiss me," Draco ordered, and as Harry's lips fell back onto his, he couldn't help but smile against them.

Because when Harry kissed him, he could forget that Bellatrix Lestrange was out there at Malfoy Manor, this very second, waiting for the forfeit.

Juliet Roses

Chapter Notes

Hi all! Thanks so much for all your thoughts and comments so far!

To any of my fellow Americans: yaaaayyyyyyyy :)

Anyway, enjoy! <3

Playlist

The Kingsnakes hoodies weren't exactly a rousing success with the team. Theo was still trying to explain to Vince what they were as they headed on to the pitch. "We really have to wear them to the party in the common room after we win?" Greg asked gloomily.

"That's the deal," Draco said confidently.

"And if we lose," Pansy said, "You have to let us ritually burn all seven of them in the common room fire?"

"That's the deal," Draco said, a little less confidently.

They entered the pitch to the boos of all four houses, save a few supporters in the front of the Slytherin section. They had expected that this time, and were more heartened to see Luna's *Malfoy Invincible* sign and Blaise's new *Parkinson, Princess of Quidditch* sign than anything. What was new was the small patch of people around Blaise and Luna: Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Neville, who Draco might have expected, but also Ginny, Fred, George, Dean, Tracey Davis, and most shockingly, Daphne Greengrass.

Astoria stopped walking at the sight of her sister, and looked liable to burst into tears at the sight of her sister's sign, a brilliant snake-green in the sunlight: *Greengrass Dominates!* Millie put an arm around her shoulder, waved at Daphne, and guided Astoria into the huddle.

"Alright, everyone, gather round!" Draco said excitedly, just as buoyed in truth by the sign of Daphne's sister. It was a real morale boost, for a game he already thought they could win.

The speech he gave was in truth a rehash of the one for the first game, but it had worked well enough before. They all seemed excited enough to yell together about how they *weren't fucking cowards.* "And I'm going to catch the Snitch. I *guarantee* you. That's not a question," he finished. "We're *winning* this game. The only question is by how much!"

"Three hundred points!" Vince shouted, over-excited, and Millie started to laugh helplessly.

"Um, okay, probably not three *hundred* points," Draco said with a helpless grin, "But a lot! Because I promised my godfather the Quidditch cup with green and silver trophy ribbons, and we're going to win both matches and get all the points we need to deliver! And we know we can do it, we're not scared of failing, because we are not what?"

"FUCKING COWARDS!"

"THAT'S RIGHT!" Draco yelled, and stomped right over to a rather alarmed-looking Roger Davies, who stood waiting to shake his hand with a face like he would rather be anywhere else. His team had beaten Hufflepuff in November when Chang caught the Snitch, albeit by almost as narrow a margin as Gryffindor beat Slytherin. But Davies looked very nervous, for the captain whose team was coming off a win and not a loss.

Maybe that could be, Draco reflected, because in isolation, the Slytherins' savage howl of *fucking cowards* could have sounded more like a taunt directed towards the Ravenclaws personally.

In Draco's defense, Ravenclaw did play like fucking cowards.

The days had been warm and rainy for February, but it didn't rain a drop on that brilliant Saturday, which began with a demonstration that Ravenclaws weren't nearly as smart as they thought they were. Draco had expected Ravenclaw to have studied their plays from the Gryffindor match, and taken note of Millie's calls, so had switched them about to opposite names to test Ravenclaw. And they fell for the bait hook, line, and sinker.

As soon as the Quaffle dropped and Astoria was quickest to it, Millie's scream of "Chaos!" had Ravenclaw zooming up like a well-drilled, well-oiled machine, soaring high above the pitch like Slytherin had against Gryffindor. The trouble was, Chaos was now the Battering Ram play, and the Beater instead fell into a tight knot with the Chasers, shielding them while Astoria flew the ball straight at the hoop. Just like that, 10-0 to Slytherin, with Ravenclaw flying down from the sky red-faced.

Draco didn't let his attention drift from searching for the Snitch. He'd never actually flown a Firebolt before, and found it zoomed along like a dream. He thought the Snitch would not appear until late in the match, when he had caught it in the blue loop, but last time Chang had been an incoherent mess, still mourning Diggory. Instead, she had a very much alive and dreamy boyfriend here cheering her on from the Ravenclaw stands, and Draco couldn't count on her not to catch the Snitch more quickly this time. He seemed to recall her not having been the one to catch it against Hufflepuff at all, and yet she'd done that. He was not about to lose his team the match again, especially as they began racking up points at a blistering rate.

Half the time, Millie didn't even bother trying to call any plays. Ravenclaw were so weak compared to Gryffindor. Or maybe it was that Slytherin practiced four days a week, had been together as a team months longer, and, oh, had known each other their entire lives. Either way, it got embarrassing for Davies's sorry lot. Davies was more of a ladies' man than a sporting man. After the 40-0, he called for a time-out, but he didn't seem to instill nearly as much new confidence in his team as Johnson had with Gryffindor. All the Ravenclaws had

figured out that Slytherin had switched up the play calls, but only half of them followed Davies's instructions to ignore the calls, with the others swooping about in the defense they'd practiced, just leading to genuine chaos. The Snitch showed itself nowhere, but that was all the better for a team in need of racking up points as much as Slytherin was.

Millie yelled out extremely unladylike obscenities when Ravenclaw put two past her in quick succession, with Chang breaking off from searching for the Snitch to fly over and block her view from the team's next two shots. Then Draco went into such a well-executed feint at the Hufflepuff stand, Chang was not only fooled and terrorized off not paying attention to the Seeker business, she nearly crashed right into her boyfriend. Diggory managed to catch her and help her back onto her broom before she hurtled all the way off, and shot Draco a dirty look as he helped her on her way. Draco blew him a kiss, winked at him, and hurtled away as Jordan began to bemoan the defensive frailties of Ravenclaw.

"Here's Inglebee and Samuels, the Ravenclaw Beaters- if you can call them that, right now they're more like the Ravenclaw *beaten*- and Slytherin are continuing their strategy of their Beaters exclusively targeting other Beaters. Samuels takes a solid hit, hacks a Bludger back at Crabbe- it hits him in the side, and he doesn't budge! Are these animated garden statues even human- oh! And there's Theodore Nott, speeding towards the hoops- pass to Parkinson- Bradley tries to intercept, and oh, he's collided with the Ravenclaw Keeper Page- that's 70-20 to Slytherin! A fifty point margin! The Slytherins have made up their deficit from the first match with Gryffindor already! What a terrifying lot of green gargoyles- sorry, Professor McGonagall, just being descriptive..."

"LET'S GO!" Millie screamed out at Slytherin. "PANSY, DAVIES TO BRADLEY!" With his pass called out before he gave it, Davies fumbled throwing the Quaffle, and Pansy swooped in to steal it right from Bradley's hands. A wave of exhilarated cheering erupted, not just from the small knot at the bottom of the Slytherin stands but a good portion of it, and as Millie yelled, "Protego Diabolica!" the cheering intensified. They ran the Serpensortia play instead, hiding Astoria behind the two larger Chasers with a backpass for her to shoot at a bewildered Page just before they reached the hoop, and it worked like a charm.

"That's 80-20 to Slytherin! What an incredible team! So many tricks! If only they had a Seeker! Malfoy and Chang, still scanning the pitch- Malfoy's gone low to ground, and Chang follows, but no sign of the Snitch- oh, it's a distraction! Slytherin have intercepted another pass by Davies when he was distracted- and Nott's off like a shot towards the Ravenclaw hoops! Page is seeing more action tonight than his captain on Valentine's Day! All the action's been at the Ravenclaw goalhoops- the Beaters are speeding to help, but oh, Crabbe has gotten Inglebee in the face! He's down! Inglebee down- oh, he's fallen on Samuels! HE'S FALLEN ON SAMUELS! Beaters falling from the sky- doesn't look like these ravens have claws- and Malfoy is diving! Is it another feint? Chang is hot on his trail..."

It was the Snitch, high up in the open sky right before the sun, so bright a day that he must not have noticed it the first time around. The Snitch began to fly lower once Draco began his surge upwards, and Draco had to pivot sharply and cut a hard diagonal across Chang's path to keep that from being her advantage. He heard her gasp and pull off, then start on his trail as he dove towards the Snitch, which was floating just below the Slytherin hoops...

"GRINDELWALD!" Millie shrieked, and Draco had already spotted it. She knew to get well out of the way. Draco executed a roll in the air, head ducking low enough it half felt he had snapped his neck, to get out of the way as he screeched past right beneath the hoops and snatched up the Snitch with it.

"HE'S GOT THE SNITCH!" she yelled, Chang slowing up behind him with a shriek of defeat. Draco raised the Snitch in his hand so the whole stadium could see the glitter in the sunlight. Then he grabbed Millie by the other hand and raised their hands together. She was laughing, throwing her head back in the sunlight manically. Then Vince and Greg had plowed into them in the air screaming so ecstatically, all four of them almost fell off their brooms.

Somewhere below them, Pansy had executed nearly as speedy a dive on her own broom to the stands, to pluck the *Parkinson, Princess of Quidditch* sign from her boyfriend's hands, and kiss the handsome cheering face behind it, falling off her broom into his lap. The knot of the other Slytherins flew a victory lap as Jordan called out the final score, 240-20 to Slytherin.

170 aggregate now, Draco's mind calculated, while most of him was screaming out as loudly as Vince and Greg, and jumping off his own broom to throw himself at Hermione. She wrapped her arms around him, and it was only then that he realized that all of Slytherin were cheering for them. Even up above them, in a knot of previously sour faces that seemed to have quite lost the plot, the broad-shouldered quartet of Bletchley, Montague, Pucey, and Warrington were cheering. And Astoria had flown right over to her sister, where they had not left each other's arms, whispering to each other intently.

A part of Draco envied Pansy and Blaise. They were snogging each other's faces off so energetically, Ron had to pull Luna and the *Malfoy Invincible* sign to safety behind him. Draco stumbled over and hugged them both, so hard they all fell over. He stumbled up, raised a hand for a high five from Neville and then the twins, and then he came face to face with Harry.

Harry looked nearly as breathless as Draco felt, an absolute fever dream in intense sunlight. For a mad moment, Draco thought of transfiguring the Snitch to a rose for him, like in second year when he caught it against Ravenclaw. He thought of kissing him right then and there in front of the whole school like his friends were, and damn the consequences-

Draco grabbed Harry's hand, squeezed it, and then mounted his broom and flew off for another victory lap in the sunshine.

Muggle or not, victory had a halo effect on the Kingsnakes hoodies, as they made their triumphant entrance to the common room after all clad in the dark green and silver. Yes, they received a fair number of insults and casual death threats for emblazoning the sacred name of Salazar Slytherin on such an ignominious article of traditional Muggle-wear. But they received just as many whispered requests from their housemates wondering where they could buy one for themselves.

Well, okay, *almost* as many.

Draco was not going to Hogsmeade on Valentine's Day, a resolution he announced much to the displeasure of all of his friends, but especially Harry. "I have to stay in and study for OWLs," he kept insisting, and avoided Harry for a few days before, to keep from giving him the chance to change his mind. He didn't want to have to say, *Valentine's Day at Hogsmeade sounds terrifyingly romantic, and also, I'm worried that whoever I'm with, my aunt will show up behind the bushes and start bombarding with Unforgivable Curses.* Ruined his mystique, that sort of thing.

It was to his displeasure, then, that he found Harry coming up to him the morning of Hogsmeade anyway. Ron had said he wasn't going to Hogsmeade at all, being kept back for more practice by Angelina Johnson, but Harry caught up to them before Draco could escape. "Hey, listen," Harry began, while Ron sidled off gloomily towards the wet Quidditch pitch. "I know you weren't planning on going today, but-"

"Don't worry, Harry, I have no intention of sending you any sort of Valentine this year," Draco said shortly. "Luna and I are officially out of business. Much to her dismay, I assure you." He'd had to put up with a great deal of whining from her, on the loss of what she called one of her favorite 'cousin bonding activities', but she had eventually agreed it was for the best.

"Wait, what do you mean, you and *Luna*?" Harry frowned, sidetracked.

"Luna and I always worked on the poems and enchantments together for your joke Valentines," Draco said, frowning. "Didn't you know that?"

"No!" Harry exclaimed, looking bizarrely hurt. "I thought it was just you! And wait, you two weren't even close back when we were in second year, and you sent me that one about the toad..."

"That one wasn't me, Harry," Draco sighed, "I don't know how many times I have to tell you," and Harry looked unspeakably glum.

"Well, okay, fine, but... will you come to Hogsmeade for just a bit? Can you meet me at the Three Broomsticks at midday?" he rallied. "It would be really great if you could come..."

"Why?" Draco said, and Harry shot him a bashful look that made Draco's body remember what it felt like, to have Harry give him that look a second before he kissed him.

"I can't explain, Hermione's waiting, just trust me, you're not going to want to miss this, okay?" he demanded. "You have to make sure and be there. I'm not supposed to say, it's a surprise."

"Okay," Draco said without meaning to, and Harry beamed at him before running off to join Luna and Hermione on the path down to Hogsmeade.

So it was their first real date. A Valentine's Day surprise. That wasn't a big deal at all, not likely to involve any presents, or romance, or dramatic gestures, Harry was an extremely subtle person... oh, Salazar, why had he said yes to this? He got absolutely nothing done that morning after that, agonizing over his clothes for literal hours, to the great amusement of

Blaise, who was also getting dressed to meet Pansy for a lunchtime date, but did so with no self-doubt. He left five minutes before Draco, getting sick of waiting for him to finish fussing over the clip in his hair.

Once Blaise was gone, Draco ended up changing almost everything. He ended up in all white and silver, paler than the melting snow as the enchantments on his pale gray calfskin boots kept the sludge off their pristine surface. He wore a long, military-style silver pea coat, an opal-colored cashmere sweater with pearl buttons, his Astaroth necklace, gray sheepskin gloves, and the fitted grey suede trousers he had worn with his suit for the Yule Ball last year. He must have looked good, because he kept getting stares as he walked out, and not just the usual *Oh, there's Draco Malfoy, he's marked for death* ones. The only real surprise was the contents of his coat pocket, namely the Snitch he'd kept that he caught against Ravenclaw, which he spent half the walk there transfiguring into the perfect golden rose.

It was a relief not to have to walk the whole way alone, and not just from paranoia about Aunt Bella that always rested at the back of his mind, and threatened to come to the forefront the further he got from the castle. It also made him feel like a loser walking alone in the midst of couples, though he would be meeting someone soon. He was glad to bump into Neville. He greeted him warmly, and Neville yelped at the sound of his voice.

"Oh, um, hey, Draco," Neville said cagily, walking faster, and Draco kept pace.

"You look nice today," Draco said. It was true, with Neville's robes also traded in for Muggle clothes, a fitted red sweater and jeans that showed off just how much growing that physique had started on, towards its eventual endpoint of hunky snakeslayer. "Really nice. Hot date?"

"I don't know," Neville said, looking down but still nearly tripping over his own feet. "Draco, don't be mad, but, um, Luna kind of asked me out this morning..."

Draco stopped walking. "What?" he exclaimed, and Neville drew his wand.

"Please don't hurt me!" Neville exclaimed. Thankfully, it was close enough to noon that there was no one around nearby, to witness one of Draco's best friends cowering from him.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Draco sighed. "I don't disapprove of you and Luna, you know that, don't you? If she's decided she wants to date you, then good for her! And needless to say, good for you. You're going out with one of the two prettiest, smartest, most loyal and fearless girls in the entire school- no, the entire *world*-"

"I know," Neville said, helpless smile breaking onto his face. "I couldn't believe it. She just came up and asked me if I was busy at noon, because she had a surprise. So I canceled on hanging out with Dean and tried to dress up... Draco, is there time for me to buy flowers? I *should* buy her flowers on Valentine's Day, shouldn't I? If I want her to make up her mind to date me after this..."

Draco checked his watch. "When are you supposed to meet?"

"Noon at the Three Broomsticks. Oh, I think I'm going to faint..."

Draco frowned. "Huh. That's when I'm meant to be meeting Harry there." It sounded bizarrely like a double date. Except Hermione had been leaving with them, and she'd be a fifth wheel, so maybe it was just all their friends hanging out... except then why would Harry have been so excited and called it a surprise? "You'd *better* bring my cousin flowers, Neville Longbottom."

"Will you help me pick?" Neville asked miserably, and Draco talked him up as they went into Dogweed and Deathcap.

Neville tried to buy Luna a yellow rose, and Draco had to shake his confidence by yelling at him. "Yellow roses mean friendship, you uncultured swine!" *Golden* roses were completely different. Neville winced and picked up a bouquet of white lilies. "And lilies mean *death*, genius! And it's Harry's mother's name! I thought you're supposed to be some Herbology whiz-"

"I can't think," Neville said, looking around wildly. "I can't even breathe. Will you please just pick some for me?"

Draco made short work of selecting flowers for Luna, a lavish bouquet of sweet Juliet roses in little, gorgeous peach buds. It would have set Neville back a whopping fifteen Galleons, had Draco not stepped in and paid for it himself. "Just tell her you bought it," Draco ordered, and Neville caught his sleeve as they left the shop.

"Wait," Neville said, lowering his voice, "Don't you want to get something for Harry? Or is that not something two blokes do, er..."

Draco had no earthly idea. He put on a cocky face. "Oh, *my* Valentine's Day present for him isn't exactly something that can be given in public," he drawled, and had the satisfaction of making an embarrassed Neville nearly trip over the cobblestones.

In a way, though, it was good that Neville was so worked-up about his first real date, taking Ginny to the Yule Ball not really counting. He didn't seem to notice the faces of his parents' torturers on wanted posters hanging in nearly every shop window they passed. Draco couldn't stop feeling shivers prickle down his spine, each time they passed his aunt's cackling face.

They walked into the Three Broomsticks together at noon sharp in high spirits, Neville finally talked into some semblance of confidence by Draco's insistence they repeat the mantra, *I'm such a catch, you can call me a Snitch.* "I'm such a catch, you can call me a Snitch," Neville repeated to himself feverishly. "I'm such a catch, you can call me a Snitch... I'm such a catch, you can... oh!" He caught sight of Luna's bright hair at a table near the back, and pushed the roses forward excitedly, saying, "Hello, these are for you..."

"Thank you!" Rita Skeeter said brightly, reaching out from her seat beside Luna. She took them and sniffed them, before putting them beside her Quick-Quotes Quill. "What lovely flowers, young man, you didn't have to... though I can't say it's the *first* time I've been besieged by admirers on Valentine's Day..."

"Draco, Neville, you made it!" Hermione enthused, coming over with two large armfuls of Butterbeer bottles. "Thanks for coming! I just got the letter this morning. I had to set things

up to make sure Madam Rosmerta wouldn't mind if we had the interview here..."

"Interview?" Draco echoed. Skeeter looked up at his voice and let out a soft shriek. At least she looked no happier to see him than vice versa. Her shiny jade green robes looked like some reptile about to swallow her up, as she turned a paler color than should be anatomically possible.

"Hey," Harry said, coming over dressed in the same plain hoodie and jeans combination that Hermione and Luna were spouting, with nothing out of the ordinary in his manner to suggest it might happen to be Valentine's Day. Draco stared at him incredulously. "Everyone but Ron is here."

"And Ron can't come," Hermione said, "So it will just have to be us. Rita, will four be good enough to fill in about Harry and his life with friends at Hogwarts?" Skeeter nodded, laying out a piece of parchment for her quill, with an arm deliberately in the way between it and Draco so he couldn't curse this one too. Draco stole a look at her hands, but they both looked unburnt by now.

"Rita?" Neville echoed disbelievingly, and Luna beamed, throwing an arm around Skeeter's shoulders like they were best friends. She leaned in and sniffed at the flowers.

"Oh, Neville, it's a nice touch," Luna said happily. "But Rita's promised to write an honest article for the Quibbler, no worries. We don't need to butter her up with flowers and all. Oh, this article is going to be wonderful for Harry, don't you think?"

Draco had hardly ever felt so lost or so embarrassed in his life. "So the surprise," Draco said slowly. "For me and Neville. Was an interview with Rita Skeeter. For the Quibbler."

"Of course, I usually write for the Prophet," Rita said huffily, "But this story is such a, er, hot exclusive, I couldn't ignore it. And while I couldn't get my editors at the Prophet to agree to run Harry's story about the night of the Third Task, Luna here's father would be more than happy... and the Prophet have agreed to turn a blind eye to my involvement, in exchange for an exclusive I'd been holding onto about a certain *someone* never seeing the light of day, but that's neither here nor there... so our deal is all set to work splendidly- that is, um, as long as Mr. Malfoy is in agreement..."

"Mr. Malfoy?" Hermione echoed suspiciously, looking between them, but she wasn't the only one who was lost now.

"Deal?" Draco repeated. "Hermione, is there something you're not telling me?"

Hermione looked so massively smug that Draco knew the culprit behind this having been sprung on them as a surprise. She must have been waiting to get one over on Draco for once. "You're not the only person who can keep secrets, Frankenstein. Rita here has agreed to help Harry spread the truth about last year, in exchange for our silence on something I figured out."

She paused dramatically, until a crestfallen Neville and Draco leaned in obligingly, and she whispered, "You see, I wasn't sure until after the article that came out about Sirius and Remus

this summer, but our new friend Rita here is an unregistered Animagus..."

So Draco had expected a surprise Valentine's Day date, and all he'd gotten was his best friend beginning an illustrious career of blackmailing prominent public figures. Under any other circumstances, he would have been overcome with pride. He knew from experience in the blue loop, after all, how valuable this Quibbler article had been for Harry, in shifting public opinion at Hogwarts. As it was, Draco pulled Neville aside, and they promised solemnly to take their shared misunderstanding to the grave. Neville looked incredibly glum afterwards, though, and Draco couldn't say he didn't feel the same. He used his wand in his pocket to turn the rose back into a Snitch.

Neville's mood gave the game away on the walk back to Hogwarts. Hermione and Luna were buzzing together about the coup this would be for the Quibbler, and Draco resented every second he'd spent trying to make those two become closer friends. Neville just lagged behind, with a look like Sisyphus had just had his boulder increased in square density.

"What's wrong with him?" Harry asked, turning back with concern. "Hey, Neville-"

"Don't, he's fine, he's just embarrassed about Luna, give him some space," Draco hissed, not wanting to put Neville through any questioning and add insult to injury. He'd sworn not to tell anyone about Neville's misconception of the occasion, but Harry figured it out quickly with that much of a hint. The expensive peach roses hadn't exactly been subtle Gryffindor romance at its finest. Draco made noncommittal noises and kept just urging Harry to leave Neville alone.

The others said goodbye when Draco peeled away from them at the gates of Hogwarts, but Harry was curious. "I thought you canceled Slytherin practice tonight because of Hogsmeade," Harry said, with that encyclopedic knowledge of Draco's schedule that wasn't at all creepy.

"Yes, but I still have the pitch booked," Draco said shortly, turning on his heel and stalking in that direction.

"Can I come fly with you?" Harry asked hopefully, jogging after him.

"No!" Draco snapped, refusing to do him the dignity of turning around.

"What are you doing going flying like that anyway," Harry laughed. "You're dressed way too nicely for..." Finally, his brain seemed to click into place. "You... you are dressed up today, aren't you? I mean, not that you don't always look good, but... hey, *Draco*, you didn't think..."

Draco stomped into the broomshed and found his Firebolt quickly, but Harry put a hand on its handle before Draco could pull it off the wall. "Draco," Harry said slowly, "You didn't think the surprise I had was a date, the way Neville did with Luna, did you?"

Draco wondered at what point things ticked over into justifiable homicide, and how much that calculation was affected by the act being spontaneously committed by an overpriced new

broomstick. "Unhand my Firebolt, Potter."

"You did, didn't you?" Harry exclaimed. He didn't move his hand, just leaned in front of it. In this small space, the Amortentia scent of his body was very strong, the magnetism of his skin so near Draco's own. "Draco, I had no idea! I didn't- we could have done something after the interview if you wanted, but I just never thought in a million years you would actually *want* to do something for Valentine's Day with me..."

"It's fine!" Draco snapped, in a tone so incensed he couldn't even convince himself.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, eyes fixing on him with determination in the dim light, gaps in the wood letting sharp beams of gold from the sunset filter through. "I had no idea. I didn't mean to jerk you around, I swear."

Draco had never thought he had. That was the most humiliating part. What was it that Hermione had said about needing to hammer out exactly what this was, so no one ended up with false expectations?

"I *know*," Draco said as coldly as he could. The syllables still came out heated as Fiendfyre, dragged out between his teeth grudging and seething. "It's my fault. Let *go*."

"Do you want to go flying together?"

"No!"

"Okay, I'm sorry," Harry whispered, bright green eyes caught in one of the golden lines of light. "I didn't... I just didn't think this..." He gestured between the two of them. "That this meant that much to you. At all."

"It doesn't," Draco snapped, and tried to shove his hands off the Firebolt. Harry just caught his hands, and kept hold of them. "What are you doing? Don't you have something better to do?"

"Draco," Harry said softly, "You're really upset, aren't you?"

"As if *you* could ever upset *me*," Draco began venomously, and meant to say something truly awful, something he could never take back, much as he probably would later wish he could. But his mind went blank, just from staring into those green eyes.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, and took Draco's right hand to his mouth and kissed it.

Draco let out a groan of savage frustration, shoved Harry against the opposite wall of the broomshed, and virtually attacked him, pressing his mouth onto Harry's with punishing force. "Sorry," Harry mumbled, only to moan when Draco kissed him again, a burst of short, hard, emphatic kisses that were trying to drive in a point, though what point, Draco didn't exactly know. "Mmm... sorry..."

"This isn't," Draco gasped, "A great way to make you sorry, is it?"

"No, no," Harry said hastily, "I'm, er, feeling more and more sorry, this is a punishment..."

"Oh, so if it's a punishment," Draco hissed, flattening his hands against Harry's chest, "You won't mind if I stop, then, will you?"

"What? No..." Harry breathed. When he leaned over to kiss Draco, Draco turned his face away. Undeterred, Harry's mouth just nosed aside the collar of Draco's pea coat, kissing at the cold-flushed skin, and Draco whimpered so loud the Quidditch shed virtually vibrated with it.

He actually felt his knees go so weak, he wished he was the one pressed up against the wall. He didn't feel like he could go flying without falling now, his legs were too unsteady from the feeling of Harry sucking and biting a hot trail down his neck. He'd probably need a minute before he could even walk out of the shed on his own two feet. "You... mmm, don't leave marks, I'm sick of... ah, enchanting them away... oh, bordel de merde, c'est chaud..." Draco let the words come out in French, a bad habit he'd picked up in the blue loop since Theo spoke the language too. Harry didn't, but the sound of Draco swearing in it never failed to make him kiss Draco harder.

Draco felt the force of Harry's mouth redouble at the sound. When Harry turned them around, pressing Draco against the wooden wall, Draco gratefully let his weight sag back, and then his head. He tilted his neck back, letting Harry unbutton the top of his coat, and then the pearl buttons, nosing at his collarbone. Every inch of skin Harry's lips touched, it felt feverish with need after, like it would never be contented without Harry touching it now.

"God, your voice. And you look so *good* today," Harry whispered, and dragged his teeth along Draco's collarbone. Draco cried out loud enough he feared anyone outside would hear. He grabbed onto Harry's jumper, panting. Harry buried his face in Draco's neck, as unwilling to leave it as Draco was willing to let him go. "You need... you need to tell me what you want, Draco, because I never know... I'm sorry I'm such an idiot... do you- do you like it when I kiss you here..."

"No, it's the worst, like being mauled by a starving Hippogriff- no, don't stop..."

"So, Draco," Luna asked him right after Gryffindor's victory over Hufflepuff, knowing how he got at setbacks and transparently trying to distract him. "How are our plans coming along?"

"What plans? Plans for failing my godfather, and humiliating everyone who ever believed in me as Quidditch captain?" he grumbled, as they left the knot of the rest of their friends fawning over Harry. Draco had none of Harry's magnanimity to cheer for his greatest opponent, let alone stick around after his victory and high-five him.

"A plan for our aunt," Luna hissed, in a thankfully low whisper as their steps took them to Hagrid's hut. Draco didn't feel like looking at other Slytherins right now, with the presentiment of their inevitable loss at the Quidditch Cup feeling all the stronger, and it seemed a small comfort at least to hear Hagrid's steady prattle. And he wanted a hug from Imoogi yesterday.

They had to wait a bit for Hagrid to get back and let them in for their unannounced visit, so they sat down together in the pumpkin patch with warming charms cast, and Draco's bluebell flames over their head as they pored over their favorite book, *Moste Dark Blood Rituals of the Demon Goddess Hecate.* "It's not like we don't have loads of her possessions to use," Luna said brightly, but they got sidetracked fairly quickly when they happened upon Hostium Posticum. Draco ended up telling her the story of using it on Umbridge. Then Hagrid showed up, looking weary as he often did these days. But he seemed energized by Harry's victory, and happy for the surprise company, and so the book got hastily shoved into Draco's bag.

"I have one plan," Luna said as they walked back to the castle at dusk, though she had nothing in hand. "You seem to have forgotten all about it, Draco. I'm almost disappointed in you."

"Don't be disappointed in me, Luna, I won't survive it!" Draco exclaimed, and she leaned in conspiratorially, stopping at the steps to the castle and whispering,

"But have you forgotten what we got for Christmas from my favorite godcousin?"

"Someday," Draco said with a helpless grin, "I'm going to tell him you call him that, and that will be the end of you, Luna Lovegood."

"Or his present will be, it's very dangerous," she said happily. "I finally went and asked him about it, since you wouldn't. He said he was disappointed in you too that you hadn't recognized it. He said you should, and wanted to be sure you were keeping it secure. I didn't tell him I've just been keeping both vials in my trunk since Christmas-"

"Draco! Luna!" Neville's voice called, and when Draco looked up, Harry was there beside him, changed out of his Quidditch robes with what looked to be the Marauder's Map in hand.

"Hi!" Luna called, then whispered, "Anyway, he said it's something called Liquid Fiendfyre-"

"We found you!" Neville announced, coming to a stop before them, before quickly turning and pointing to Harry. "That is, er, Harry, Harry found you- I mean, he found Draco, we were at the party, but Harry just kept going on about Draco, so Hermione said he should just go find him, and we got out the map, and I decided to tag along because- er." He seemed to realize he was babbling, and took Draco's grave face as some overreaction to this. "Sorry! Sorry! I didn't- um..."

"Congratulations, Harry!" Luna said, and hugged him. "I'd rather you hadn't have won, but I'll still say congratulations!"

"Um, thanks, Luna," Harry said, giving a genuine grin before turning to Draco. "Hey, Draco, I didn't get to see you after the game, you left too soon... I hope it's not too competitive for us to, er, hang out a bit anyway... I just wanted to know what you thought..."

"I think," Draco said, clutching onto Luna's hand, "That I need to sit down."

"Draco?" Luna asked anxiously. "Draco, what's wrong? Is it Harry? Should I send him away? Should I curse him for you?"

"I just need to sit down," Draco repeated, and when he slumped onto on the castle steps, Harry went into his bag and went for the draught of peace. He was thankfully too hurried to take notice of the book inside, his long-missing book that might to this day be attracting furious missives from Madam Pince or at least some heinous library fines.

"Here," Harry said, able to recognize the signs of impending anxiety by now. Draco downed it in one go. Luna began to energetically rub his shoulders. "I'm sorry if it makes you anxious to see us- to see *me*- I should have given you space after the match-"

"Oh, no, this is great," Draco gasped out, grabbing onto Luna and Neville's hands to steady himself, while looking Harry in the eye with a manic smile. "Really. No, I think the whole dragon-affiliated angle for my dark wizard branding has just been revitalized..."

He let Astaroth hang in front of his neck between them, though if he had his hands free, he'd probably be trying to cast Reducto on him. He was looking more and more like one of the dragon heads in dark fire.

Harry seemed unhappy to be the only one not getting his hand held. "Draco, what's going on?" It must seem like there was always something going on with Draco.

"Sorry," Draco laughed harshly, "Not trying to steal your thunder here, youngest Seeker in a century," and pressed his face into Luna's shoulder.

A second later, Harry had taken Draco's face and cupped it, as if desperate for the privilege to be the one to comfort Draco. "I don't care about Quidditch," Harry said heatedly. "Not compared to- Draco, what's *wrong*?"

"The good news," Draco laughed, "Is that we've just found an excellent way to murder my aunt. The bad news is, we'd all go right down with her."

The March issue of the Quibbler arrived with no more fanfare than every month, as Draco pulled his plate out of the way, the package thudded over the words THIEF, BLOOD TRAITOR, LIAR, and replaced them with Harry's nervous grinning face. Draco had seen better pictures of his... whatever Harry was to him, but he could hardly have asked for better words to accompany the image as it unfurled like a magic carpet:

HARRY POTTER SPEAKS OUT AT LAST:

THE TRUTH ABOUT HE WHO MUST NOT BE NAMED

AND THE NIGHT I SAW HIM RETURN

"YES!" Draco cried out, pumping his fist. He saw owls delivering a dozen other copies to students at the other three tables. No self-respecting Slytherin would have subscribed. But

Draco had the feeling issues would soon be circulating the school at a record pace. He remembered copies passed around even Slytherin well after Umbridge's decree against them. He opened his, found the article, and there were several better pictures of Harry in there, especially one Rita had taken of him when he wasn't looking, staring out the window pensively during a break in the interview. Yeah, threat of expulsion or not, Draco was going to hold onto this issue.

Immediately after breakfast, Draco went around gathering Luna and the Gryffindors for a walk by the lake. It was getting warm enough out for warming charms to suffice. Luna ran down to let Dobby know to join them if he could. Dobby popped in by the time they'd made it there and were settling by the lake, bringing cushions, blankets, and ample refreshments. They'd just had breakfast, but everyone enjoyed a strong cup of Prince of Wales tea against the lingering chill. Ron at least was also more than happy to tear through some of the little pastries and sandwiches. Draco cast a strong Inmotus around their part of the lake, where waves of melting ice kept lapping up against the shore. He gave Luna the honor of reading to them.

But Luna was happy to hand it over to Hermione, claiming she was the best speaker. "Future Minister of Magic here," Draco drawled, and Hermione looked embarrassed but pleased. He put away his own issue and reclined to cuddle with Luna as they listened.

"Can't believe I missed this for remedial practice," Ron grumbled. "It must have been such a fun day, even with Skeeter," and Draco and Neville exchanged looks.

"Yeah," Draco said dryly. "It was great. Go on, Striker."

Hermione cleared her throat. "'Harry Potter's eyes brim with the ineradicable pain of the loss of his parents, a pain he fights back manfully to proclaim the shocking truth about their murderer...' oh, Harry, don't make that face, we knew what we were getting with Skeeter. And she knows her audience. This stuff works. Come on, just listen. 'The terrible blight upon wizardkind we all thought dead and gone has returned, and the young and brave hero Harry Potter, pride of the wizarding world, has come forward with his boyishly handsome face and haunted green eyes to tell the story of the terrible ordeal he suffered, fighting He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named once more...'"

The fallout from the Quibbler didn't begin until tomorrow. Whispers had already begun to circulate that Sunday. When they brought the issue to Hagrid to show him that evening, he'd already heard about it. But Umbridge looked unworried at supper that night, cheerfully tormenting Trelawney as always. The next morning was a different story, as she looked self-righteously vicious even before a torrent of owls descended over the Gryffindor table, jockeying to deliver letters to a newly notorious Harry Potter.

Draco watched enviously as Gryffindors began reading out the 'fan mail' with glee, the twins giving dramatic readings, but when he caught Luna's eye, she didn't look jealous, just proud. He tried to follow her example, and sure enough, there were still letters left unopened by the time they met in the library after classes, for Draco to put his own dramatic skills to reenacting. "Harry, I know you are still but fifteen, and I am a witch of fifty-seven," Draco read out in a falsetto, hand on his heart, "But reading of your courage against He-Who-Must-

Not-Be-Named has bestirred me, in ways I have not felt in many years- bestirred me in my mind *and* in my loins..."

Hermione made a choking noise, trying to swat him with some letters. "It does *not* say that, Frankenstein, you pervert!" she hissed, and snatched the letter from him, only to see to her dismay that it did indeed read *loins*. Luna and Neville struggled to keep their laughter from going too loud in the library, while Ron and Harry looked clueless.

"What are *loins*?" Harry asked blankly.

Draco smirked, raking his teeth over his lip before giving him a look through his eyelashes. "If you're not too busy later, Famous Harry Potter, I could give you a demonstration."

Hermione whacked him with a roll of letters for his filthiness, while Harry just blinked at him guilelessly, none the wiser.

Luna was soon the student of the hour, with her father having put himself on the line for them. Draco just hoped this wouldn't come back to bite her. She had already landed squarely in Umbridge's crosshairs once, memorably at Sirius's trial. Draco could only hope Umbridge's fear of the talon brand would prove some deterrent.

She was already on the warpath. She'd marched up to the Gryffindor table, banning Harry from Hogsmeade, docking a massive number of points from Gryffindor, and giving another week of detention, which thankfully would end before Ron's birthday. And she put up her decree that anyone in possession of the Quibbler would be expelled, just like last time, but Draco had failed to appreciate before how counter-productive that was. Hermione said they couldn't have had better marketing if they put up a billboard in the Great Hall. That launched him into a minor panic over his Muggle Studies OWL prospects, from not knowing what a billboard was. But she proved to be right, as no less than fifteen students sidled up to their library table just that afternoon, asking if there were issues of the Quibbler they could borrow.

Almost no one seemed to be made happier by the change in status quo, though, than Dean Thomas. He came up to Draco grinning the next day, announcing that this had pushed Seamus over to finally seeing the light and believing Harry. Apparently he even wanted to join Dumbledore's Army. For Draco, this meant that Dean was hopeful they could start hanging out playing football together again. Although Draco had a criminally packed schedule, he was happy to agree, and restart their regular Saturday football scrimmages again.

But there was a hitch to all this, which Draco couldn't believe he hadn't foreseen. It was the same as in the blue loop, except now Draco was on the other side of it, and had to suffer the quiet resentment of Vince, Greg, and Theo for the entirety of that Tuesday's Quidditch practice before Millie blurted, "Why did you tell everyone their fathers are Death Eaters?"

There was no going back to overlapping drills after that.

Draco directed them to fly down to the pitch and sit, with Blaise coming over from the stands with a look like he knew what this was for already. Dobby, Wooky, and Nissy showed up with seats and refreshments, but the air was no less strained from it.

"Okay, fine," Draco said evenly. "Let's talk." He tried not to flinch when Theo went over to the side of the pitch and came back with an already worn copy of the Quibbler, Harry's grin on the cover like an accusation. "*I'm* not the one who said about your fathers, that was-"

"Don't play innocent, Draco," Blaise said with a heavy sigh. He'd sat down and thrown an arm around Pansy's hunched shoulders. "You've quoted in this interview. And Theo saw you at the Three Broomsticks with the Skeeter woman on the last Hogsmeade weekend. You were there when Potter named them, weren't you? And you didn't stop it. Did you even try?"

"This is your weirdo *cousin*," Pansy said, her old dislike for Luna coming back into her voice. "This is *her father's* stupid crazy person magazine-" She held up a hand when Draco sat up indignantly. "Sorry, whatever, that's not what matters. Draco, you could have at least *warned* them-"

"What good would it have done?" Draco protested. In truth, he simply hadn't thought about his yearmates, as he listened to Harry listing out all the names he'd heard in the graveyard. "It's not the point of the article. And anyway, it's not like my father isn't named there too-"

"Who you don't live with anymore," Theo interrupted, pretty blue eyes gone cold and hard. He downed his juice in one go and threw the cup aside with uncharacteristic carelessness. "Stop playing dumb, Draco. *You've* forsaken your family. None of the rest of us have. If you want to cut ties with yours, we accepted that, but don't take us down with you. My father's never been anything but kind to you. He's the one who talked me into doing Quidditch with you, for Salazar's sake-"

"How about this?" Draco snapped, losing his battle with his temper. "If your fathers didn't want to be named as the Death Eaters at the graveyard, here's an idea. Don't *be* the Death Eaters at the graveyard!" Vince flinched back, and Blaise put a protective hand on his shoulder. "I'm not going to curse you, okay? Any of you! We're just talking! I just- what do you expect from me? For me to get Harry and Luna to leave your fathers out of it, because I'm friends with their *sons*? These people are my enemies, in case you haven't noticed! *They'd* do far worse than put my name in an article! Or did you miss the Black Dagger that nearly mutilated Theo-"

"Because *you* robbed *your* aunt! You should have protected *their* families," Millie insisted, undaunted. They seemed a united front on this question, whatever Draco tried to say. "We all grew up together, didn't we? Does that mean nothing to you anymore?"

Draco was starting to have a very bad feeling about Slytherin's future Quidditch prospects. At least it didn't seem any of them suspected Draco had been there in the graveyard. They must just think the recruitment push for Draco was because of his reputation.

He almost told them all that there was a war coming, he'd chosen a side, and soon they'd have to as well. But he feared he knew which side most if not all of them would land on, and it

wasn't his own. "None of you deny your fathers were there," Draco said levelly, trying to get things back to the facts.

"Of course not," said Theo, getting more heated than Draco may have ever seen him. "It's not like my father *or* theirs had a choice, Draco, don't act like they did. If they hadn't come when the Dark Lord called, then they'd already be *dead*. You know *your family* doesn't suffer deserters idly-"

"Then why am *I* still alive?" Draco yelled, and Blaise snorted, turning his face aside discontentedly. Pansy squeezed his hand, her eyes anxious but not hopeful.

"For now," Theo said astutely, "You're alive for now," and Draco arched an eyebrow, leaning across the picnic to give him a soft, pouty look.

"For *now*, huh, Theodore?" Draco purred. "You know something I don't, gorgeous?"

Theo froze there under the floodlights from that word, even in a heated argument. "Don't call me that," he said more shakily.

"Draco," Pansy said fearfully, "You know how dangerous these people are. *We* don't want to see anything happen to you, going up against them this openly. Why did you have to end up caught up with Potter and his cronies in the first place?"

Theo forcibly recovered his composure, tossing his dirty blond hair as his aristocratic face twisted with an envious kind of disdain. "We all know why he's caught up with *Potter*."

"So you really do think now that they're-" Blaise began, with the sound of a discussion being picked back up from more than a few times before.

"It's true, then?" Millie said incredulously. "He's shagging Harry Potter now?"

"WE ARE NOT SHAGGING!"

"Oh, what," Theo hissed, eyes two venom-laden blue daggers, dark in that moment as Aunt Bella's obsidian. "He's not let you get that far yet?"

Many years ago, maybe even months ago, Draco would have let that be that. He would probably have pulled out his wand and cursed Theo and maybe all of them, at best stormed away and abandoned Quidditch practice, and maybe the Quidditch team with it. But these children were his friends again, for better or for worse. He cared about them, much as he wished he didn't.

He *hadn't* been able to just take all those years growing up together and throw them aside like they never happened, though he'd spent years in the red line trying. A few months of Quidditch, and he couldn't but feel the dearness of all of them, their foibles and fears and limits. Because he loved the Gryffindors, he loved Luna, but he wasn't *like* them, not the six who'd sat out by the lake with him reading the Quibbler triumphantly. Draco was like these six people before him, defeated children struggling to figure out where they fit in their fathers' war. These were his kind.

"I don't know what I should have done, alright?" Draco said finally. "I wish all our fathers hadn't been caught up in it. I wish there was no reason for them to be. I wish... I wish our families were free of this, that we could have just grown up without all this *shit* they put on us-"

"Stop wishing," Blaise said grimly, "And start living in the real world."

Regrets and Restitution

Chapter Notes

Playlist

After the Quibbler's publication, everyone knew Harry was capable of casting fireball spells. The twins had never seemed more impressed with him, but that also meant that the first time DA met after the article, congratulations and applause were quickly followed by obnoxious requests to see Harry Potter throw fire. "It's, um, something probably too difficult for us to learn here," Harry said weakly, "And, er, far too dangerous, right, Hermione?" She nodded primly. "So maybe we can go over Patronuses again today..."

"No!" George exclaimed, and Fred leapt on top of one of the empty crates.

"What do we want?" Fred called dramatically.

"FIREBALLS!" George yelled.

"And when do we want them?"

"NOW!"

"Say it with me, Dumbledore's Army!" Fred called. "FI-RE-BALLS! FI-RE-BALLS! FI-RE-BALLS!" And then he led the group in a three-syllable chant, which made up for lack of creativity with enthusiasm. Soon everyone but Ron, Hermione, and Draco had joined them against Harry. Draco shot Neville an accusing look, and he wilted.

"Luna's doing it," he said defensively, and sure enough, Draco's favorite cousin was there in the thick of it, jumping up and down demanding fireballs.

"FI-RE-BALLS! FI-RE- what?" she went at Draco's accusing stare. "I want to learn too!"

"Draco, you can just conjure us a non-flammable room, right?" Neville asked hopefully, and Draco regretted not having objected more strenuously to the common misconception that he had personally created the Room of Requirement.

"Tell you what," Draco drawled, strolling to the front of the room. "If you have your heart set on fireballs, you can see them. But Harry isn't the one who can teach you. *I'm* the one who taught *him* that spell, he wouldn't know how to teach anyone else. It would have to be me. And I'll only do that for any of you on one condition."

"We'll pay you!" Fred said eagerly.

"No, it's simple. You need to prove you're worthy of one of my best spells. And to do that, you need to beat me at a duel."

Everyone looked unimpressed, rather than cowed by this proclamation. "Did *Harry* beat you at a duel?" Ginny asked skeptically.

"Oh, yeah, totally, loads," Draco lied, at the same time as Harry admitted,

"No, but I came close a couple times."

Their little army burst into merry laughter, with Harry suffering Draco's indignant attempts to whack him over exposing his lie so quickly. He was grinning, though, eyes bright, and when he caught Draco's wrists in their half-hearted attempts to swat at him, Draco had to go limp in his grasp to avoid the stupid heat that put through him. *Pavlovian*. Merlin, did Draco have issues.

"You don't get to learn fireballs," Draco insisted, "Unless you beat me in a duel. And I will warn you all, I am unquestionably the greatest duelist at Hogwarts of all the students- of all the professors, even, save perhaps Dumbledore and McGonagall, and of course, Professor Snape-"

"I challenge you to a duel!" George said excitedly, and there went intimidation.

Draco wiped the floor with George, but he'd introduced a new element to DA meetings that once unleashed couldn't be bottled back up: dueling practice. While the first segment of meetings still involved reviewing new spells, the second part now included at least a few practice duels between members, the Room obligingly dropping a circular glass shield around duelists at the room center.

The others would cluster around, pressing their faces to the magic-proof glass. Fred and George would take bets, despite Hermione's best efforts to make them stop. "We are not running some underground dueling ring!" she would shriek, "This is just for practice!" and Fred and George would nod solemnly, while taking handfuls of Galleons from eager students behind her back.

And in this portion of the meetings, Draco found himself taking a more active role, despite his resolution at the start to not to involve himself at all. It was just too frustrating, watching ineptitude in action, when he could intervene to save it from quite so acutely aggrieving his eyeballs. He put a quick stop to all the high-faluting talk about dueling poses, and any niceties about not shooting spells at an opponent on the ground. "We're an army, not a sports team," Draco told them firmly. "The people we might end up fighting, they will absolutely curse you when you're down."

Fred and George made an official ranking sheet and dueling bracket, at which they placed themselves, then Draco, then Harry at the top, though they had to move themselves down after being bested by Draco, Hermione, and then, much to Draco's overwhelming excitement, Ron. When Ron beat George at their practice duel in mid-March, it was all Hermione could do to stop Draco from charging the dueling bubble to hug him. Once Ron was out, Draco cast Vermillious to celebrate, shooting red sparks up into the air, and then did the unthinkable:

formally declared him to have ascended to the heights of the number one Weasley on Draco's personal ranking.

That made Ron look happy, but not nearly as happy as Harry did.

"Does that mean you don't fancy Charlie Weasley anymore?" he whispered in his ear, as people were filtering out of the Room of Requirement after.

"Harry," Draco whispered in his ear, "What I fancied was that he was a dragontamer, with all the leather and *whips*. If you have any of *those* on offer..."

"Okay," Luna said, "I've made a list of ways to kill our aunt. Let me know what you think."

Hermione gave her a disturbed look, and then a furtive one in the direction of where Hagrid was puttering about the pumpkin patch outside his hut window, shooing off Horklumps. But eventually curiosity won out and she too looked down at the results of Luna's brainstorming.

The End Times of Bellatrix Lestrange

A Collaborative Project by the Rat Thieves

GOAL

Murder

TARGET
Bellatrix Black Lestrange

CAUSE

Declaration of Formal Enmity (a.k.a. Blood Feud)

Against Rat Thief in Chief Draco Lucius Malfoy

RESOURCES

The Rat Thieves

(Rat Thief in Chief Draco Lucius Malfoy)

(Rat Thief First Officer Hermione Jean Granger)

(Rat Thief Strategist Luna Elizabeth Lovegood)

Dobby, Blunderbusses (Ron, Harry, Neville)? The Weasleys?

Two vials Liquid Fiendfyre (O_O)

Remainder of Naufragiam (?)

Pammaque Periander's moonstone dagger (!)

Dark magic/black magic/blood magic/Slytherin-type activity (TBD)

Mysterious contents of Bellatrix's vault (if borrowed/stolen from Grimmauld/Snape)

Invisibility cloak, Marauder's Map (if borrowed/stolen from Harry)

Two-way mirror with Uncle Sirius (if borrowed/stolen from Harry)

Dumbledore, Order of the Phoenix (last resort! Murder attempt is *secret* murder attempt!)

TARGET'S RESOURCES

Lifetime of dark magic experience

Murder know-how

Ruthlessness

Sadism

Insanity

Pureblood wealth

Malfoy Manor

Draco's father
(Her sister a.k.a. Draco's mother? Sorry :{)

Dozens of Death Eaters (!)

Lord Voldemort (!!!)

"You know," Hermione said, "I'm starting to think this might not be the best idea-"

"Striker!" Draco whined. "You promised that if I confided in you, you'd support me!"

"It does look rather hopeless," Luna said cheerfully. "And I think Hermione is ethically opposed to cold-blooded murder." She gave no specifics of her own stance.

"I have to get Aunt Bella before she gets me!" Draco protested. "She's declared formal enmity! It's kill or be killed! Survival of the fittest! Law of the jungle! Get before you get got-"

"We get it, Draco," Hermione said, looking very pale, and looked out at Hagrid as if hoping he would somehow intuit what was being discussed and save them all from it. "I'm not disputing that you may have to take lethal measures against such a cruel and dangerous individual. What I'm worried about is the odds of your *success* at those measures... don't you think we'd be better off leaving fighting her to the Order of the Phoenix? Dumbledore? Your godfather, your uncle... you know, people with experience? Who have a larger plan and strategy that we might mess up..."

"If I hadn't acted on my own initiative," Draco said grimly, "Emptying her vault in Gringotts, it would have been too late. She only escaped a little after." *Which is a total coincidence you should absolutely never question.* "It's us acting on our own, *apart* from Dumbledore or the others, that they'll never be able to predict. It won't fall into their calculations, not even the Dark Lord's. We're just supposed to be children. We have the element of surprise."

"How, though?" Hermione said, picking up the sheet. "How are we going to surprise them?"

With the meeting Aunt Bella had offered long passed, Draco had no answer. "It's not clear yet," he said with a sigh. "But when the opportunity arises, we'll know it. We can shelve this for now... but we'll do research. Yes, Striker, research on *dark* magic. You too. Fight fire with fire. So when we have the chance to find her and take her down, we *will* be ready."

"Okay," Harry said, "It's in my right hand," and Draco burst out laughing.

"No!" he exclaimed. "Liar! Left hand!" He tapped Harry's left hand, and Harry blinked.

There was indeed a small pebble in Harry's left and not his right hand. "Oh," Harry said, flushing, and it did not seem these Occlumency exercises were destined to go very well. Draco had learned to lie to Aunt Bella seamlessly at that, after only a handful of sessions. But he and Harry been doing the lying game for far more sessions, and Harry was still transparent. "Was that just a lucky guess? I didn't feel like you got very deep in my mind that time, and I did try and empty it..."

"Honestly, Harry, I didn't need to go into your mind for that," Draco said, wincing, "You're just not a good liar. I could read your face. It's easier with two options only, though. Let's try something harder, okay?" He slid off the arm of Harry's chair, taking the pebble with him.

"Okay," Harry said, and then reached out and smoothed Draco's hair out of his face, showing where his focus was perhaps being stolen. "I'm sorry. I just..."

"Don't tell me it's my fault for being distracting," Draco warned. Harry's desire to snog him could not be more overwhelming and terrifying than Draco's desire to flee from Aunt Bella in fear of the Cruciatus, historically terrible humiliation, or both. "Just sit me down, tell me to close my eyes, and then hide the pebble somewhere in the room. Then you tell me where it is, I tell if you're lying or not, and I try to guess where. Sound good?"

"I don't trust you not to look," Harry said immediately, though he pushed Draco onto the emerald chair with a slight smile.

"Then just cast Obscuro on me or something," Draco said and rolled his eyes. "Blindfold spell? Hello? Sweet Salazar, I cannot believe I allow you to put that ignorant a mouth on me- don't glare at me like that, here's the motion..."

"Obscuro," Harry said, mastering it easily, and Draco felt a plain black blindfold appear around his eyes, blocking them completely. "Alright, I'm gonna hide it." Draco waited, listening keenly, and then Harry came back, only to lean over him, breath on his neck, with Draco still blindfolded. "What am I doing right now?"

"You're trying to decide," Draco deadpanned, "Whether it would be creepy to kiss me while I'm still blindfolded."

"Damn it!" Harry exclaimed, pulling off Draco's blindfold and sagging into his own chair, frustrated. "I didn't feel you in my brain at all." The flush on his face was adorable, sullen look all the more so, and Draco wished that Harry had given in to temptation, even though they did have work to do instead.

"Harry," Draco laughed, "That's because I wasn't. That was just guessing too."

"Oh," Harry sighed, then leaned forward, seeming to steel himself. "Okay. My mind's a dagger now. Ask me any question."

"Where did you put the pebble?"

"With the tongs by the fireplace," Harry said steadily. "Am I lying?"

Draco studied him. "Yes," he said, and Harry flinched.

"Okay," Harry said, only a bit thrown. "Where did I put it, then?"

Draco stared at Harry, then pushed into his mind. Whatever visualizations he gave Harry, without lengthy preparation and meditation, it was never that difficult to just make his way inside, and see what was going on there. The image came up before him of Harry concealing the pebble beneath the red chair. He grinned in satisfaction, sliding down to his knees before the chair and feeling down by the leg he'd seen Harry put it. Harry seemed to enjoy making him crawl around searching, knocking at him lightly with his bare foot on Draco's shoulder. Draco smirked up, having him caught- except then Harry was laughing, and there was nothing there for Draco to find.

"Look under *your* chair," Harry said, and Draco turned and found it there instead.

"Impressive," Draco said, and didn't get off his knees. He regarded Harry from the floor, tilting his head. He flattened each palm over Harry's instep, and Harry's smugness faded, going more flustered. "Once you've gotten it right, that's it for the lying game, you know. Time for me to cast Legilimens and make you fight me up front." He tossed his hair back, watching the unsteady rise and fall of Harry's chest, as he peered down with increasing focus. "If you want me down here, Harry, the carpet's comfortable. If it makes *you* more comfortable..."

"No," Harry said immediately, pushing up his glasses and shrinking back in his chair, feet sliding from Draco's grasp. "I can't focus with you *there*- don't give me that face, you know why-"

"Why not?" Draco said obliviously, giving Harry his well-practiced look of cute young innocence. "Why *can't* you focus when I'm here, Harry?" He teased a hand lightly up the side of Harry's calf, and Harry shuddered. "I can't see why you should have a problem with it..."

"Oh God," Harry groaned, and then had grabbed a handful of Draco's hair, making Draco grin wolfishly up at him, abandoning the pretense. "You know what it makes me think of."

"No, Harry," Draco said softly, "I think you're going to have to tell me," and leaned forward and rested his cheek on Harry's knee. He let the weight of his head fall against Harry's thigh, and Harry's fingers stroked through his hair softly, making Draco arch and purr against Harry's thigh-

"Get in your own chair," Harry ordered firmly, abruptly pulling his hand and knees away, "And cast Legilimens on me," and Draco smirked but obeyed.

"Okay," Draco said, as composed as if he hadn't been teasing Harry for a second. "Visualization. Your mind is a blade. I know you don't like the obsidian one. Okay, your mind is a sword. The Sword of Gryffindor. Come on, you see it enough in Dumbledore's Office- and you've *used* it, to great effect. If you can use it to slay a Basilisk, you can use it to keep me out of your head."

If Harry had been as good with the real sword as his mental sword, he, Ron, and Draco would all be long-dead, haunting the Chamber with nothing to do but vandalize that god-awful statue of Salazar Slytherin.

As soon as Draco cast Legilimens, he was inside, although in Draco's experience, that might be his own fault. Harry's ability to keep him out seemed inversely proportional to how much Draco had flirted with him before the attempt. Harry must have gotten very hot and bothered, because the images came flashing with clarity, no less so than in their first session:

The Sword of Gryffindor that Harry had been visualizing appeared before him, a brilliant silver covered in rubies, emerging from the Sorting Hat, with the brilliant phoenix-like glimmer of a very last hope. Harry's hand seized it as he rose to face the Basilisk, with its head the size of a whole Thestral but blinded, smashing into pillars and making them hurtle down in its path. Blood dripped down from its empty sockets, fangs bared in the light, slipping down over them in anticipation of the taste of Harry's blood, a predator no less

honed on the kill for its wound, rearing on him as if in the slow motion of the inevitable: death itself, come to take the Boy Who Lived like it had been meant to all those years ago...

The Basilisk lunged, probably by sound and smell, and only just missed, with Harry dodging. The Basilisk hit the wall, lunged again, and terror flashed through, nauseous and acrid, at the raking of its forked tongue against Harry's waist. Harry took the handle of the sword, gripping it between both hands. He held it high, crimson glimmering unreal, nothing but a dream in the light, the moment after death was already sure, where the mirage appeared, when it was already too late...

The Basilisk lunged right at him. Harry threw everything he had forward into a single blow, right into the outstretched gaping maw of the beast. He struck true, blood pouring down like a waterfall all over Harry's arms even as a fang sunk and then shattered into Harry's bloodied arm-

He saw himself as Nagini, hungry, fangs sinking into the ribs of Arthur Weasley, with a simultaneous flash of recoiling and vicious triumph-

He saw himself asking, "Do you have *fangs,* Harry?" The world narrowed to Draco's fingers as he began to farcically count each of Harry's teeth, and Harry's lips felt on fire from the touch, mind conversely almost numb from helpless desire at that guilty fleeting closeness, hoarded for every bit of it he could get... "Let's see... normal tooth, normal tooth, normal tooth... not a fang, not a fang... yeah, let's see, also not a fang..."

Harry kissed the back of Draco's hand, and Draco's pale skin looked a bit more luminous than it should. It always seemed to in Harry's memories, like there was something angelic rather than demonic in Draco's alabaster pallor, a glow like Harry was tasting light just to touch it-

He saw out of Harry's eyes when Harry was smaller, sitting in what must be the Gryffindor boys' dorms, like the ones Draco had seen in third-year but smaller: first-year, to judge by Ron's extreme youth and the words he was saying. "Harry, does it matter?"

"I'm just curious," Harry said, with a furtive guilty feeling as he spoke the words. "I mean, he told us himself that he's gay, so it's probably true, right, and how *would* he be so sure, if there isn't someone he *likes*- do you think he fancies someone, or-"

"I don't know, he never hangs out around anyone male but Professor Snape, so," Ron joked, and Harry took him far too seriously.

"Professor Snape!" Harry exclaimed loudly. "Of course he fancies him! It all makes sense!"

"Um, no," Ron said, wrinkling his nose. "Malfoy is weird, but he isn't *that* weird. It's probably just another student if it's anybody... Harry, we shouldn't talk about this, someone might..." Ron glanced nervously over to Dean and Seamus playing Exploding Snap on the bed, but the booms seemed to be hiding their voices.

"They can't hear us." Harry lowered his voice. "You think it's another student? You don't... you don't think he could fancy, er, another first-year, do you? Like- maybe one of *us*, even, or..."

"Come off it, mate," Ron said, giving Harry a whack. "You're acting like you *want* him to fancy you or something..."

The scene changed to the house that Draco had seen before in his memories: Number 4 Privet Drive, ordinary and cramped and quintessentially Muggle as ever, decorated for Halloween, with a handful of badly-carved pumpkins displayed in place of pride on the mantle, the initials DD slashed into each one. Some far more nicely-carved pumpkins were on the ground in the corner, with little need to guess who had made the little cat face, bat, and vampire face, though one that looked to have been of a witch on her broomstick seemed to have been half-smashed. Harry's reflection in the windows of the living room made him look small, although not tiny, with the Muggles not very different than Draco remembered seeing them at Kings Cross.

They were all gathered around the television in the living room, like the Grangers had used to. The aunt was sat at a chair further than the uncle and cousin, perhaps because the television said it was football news. Neither she nor a bored Harry, sitting in the hallway playing aimlessly with a pair of toy soldiers, seemed very interested in the football program, until Breaking News came on. Vernon and Dudley made such noises of shock that she looked up and Harry came wandering in.

"I have his trading card!" Dudley protested. "From back when he played at West Ham! And he was at Man City too, wasn't he?"

"Suspect they're all happy to have him out of the showers," Vernon said grimly, face contorted with a distaste unusually virulent even for him. "Figures it would be one of the blacks. The league's gone to the dogs ever since they started letting that lot in..."

"Oh, that's awful, they shouldn't have these gross things on the telly. Don't look at this, Dudders," Petunia said, coming over to pull Dudley's face away, but he was transfixed.

"What's that?" Harry asked, peering with interest at the news that Vernon found such an abomination. The television read: *The Sun Exclusive- £1m Football Star: I AM GAY. Former Norwich City and West Ham footballer Justin Fashanu Comes Out as Homosexual in Interview.*

"What does that mean?" Harry asked, frowning. Dudley turned and sneered.

"Don't you know anything, Harry? It means weirdos. Queers. He's a *shirt-lifter*," Dudley said, miming lifting his own shirt and making high-pitched cooing noises in mockery.

"Dudley, where did you learn that kind of language?" Petunia fretted, while Vernon turned his grim gaze to Harry. Harry quickly put his two toy soldiers at a larger distance from each other.

"Don't you listen, boy," Vernon snarled. "We don't need you getting any more freak ideas in your head. Get back in your cupboard!"

Draco was thrown out of his chair by a blast of wind, dragged back to reality as he found Harry pale, staring at him with a haunted look.

"Harry," Draco breathed, "I'm sorry, Harry, could you not focus much, or-"

"I got you out, didn't I?" Harry said testily, gripping onto the red arms of his chairs so hard his knuckles were white. "I hate this, I hate letting you in my head-"

"Harry, what did he mean, back to your cupboard?" Draco vaguely remembered Harry saying something once about having used to live in a cupboard. He'd taken it as a mediocre joke.

"Nothing!" Harry snapped. "Again! I'm angry, I'll be more focused, that's how it works-"

"Try and drive me out mentally, not with magical outbursts-"

"I'll get you out however I can! Just *cast* on me!"

"Legilimens!" Draco called against his better judgment. He felt the sharpness of Harry's agitated mind, then, trying to shove him out bodily. But it was so disorganized, it was easy to slip past any defenses, down every dark hallway and into the deepest corners of Harry's mind... a mind that looked in its shapes and rooms like Number 4 Privet Drive. And here, under the stairs, there was a cupboard...

Draco opened the door, and inside, there was a little boy. He didn't recognize him at first as Harry, because he was very young, maybe only four or five, and he didn't have glasses. But even in the dark, those brilliant green eyes were the same, red with crying. He was reaching past Draco to claw at the door of the cabinet. "Let me out!" the small child was calling, pleading. "Please, Aunt Petunia, I'm sorry, please-"

It was not the aunt's face but the uncle's that appeared at the grate. "You should have thought about that," Vernon said furiously, "Before making *funny things* happen, like your *freak* parents! You don't deserve a bedroom of your own! This is what suits the likes of you, it's more than you deserve-"

"Come on, Vernon, it's time for Dudders to blow out his candles. We can't let *her* child spoil our little boy's *birthday,*" Petunia's voice called, and then their footsteps receded. The sound of two voices singing Happy Birthday came in from past the door, a dull murmur in the distance like some prospect of happiness forever receding. A spider crawled over the crying face of the child. Harry screamed, slapping at it as he was wracked with panicked, terrified sobs. He slapped frantically at the door of the cupboard, but the singing and then cheering continued.

"Make a wish!" called Aunt Petunia, voice thin and hysterically bright, and then Draco's head had exploded in pain.

He was in the Room of Requirement with Harry touching his temples, trying to pull Draco's hands off where he was grabbing them. The pain receded, but not the ringing in his ears. It seemed Harry had found a way to throw him out of his head cleanly after all. It was just that strength of Harry's that was the problem, which would have sufficed to toss out a dozen Dark Lords with how hard he had thrown him. "Draco? Draco, are you alright? Oh, God, did I hurt you?"

"I'm fine," Draco said, able to tell what Harry was saying by watching his mouth more than anything. But slowly, the ringing in his ears faded too. Harry grabbed Draco's face, then wrapped his arms around him tightly. It was ostensibly to offer Draco comfort, but Draco had the awful feeling Harry was in the one in need of it. "I'm fine. You're just- your mind is just strong, Harry, it really is. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you remember things like that..."

Harry pulled back, lip quivering, and looked more vulnerable than in years. There was the imprint of the face of that very young child on his visage, thrown away into a cupboard like trash for the first time, but not the last. "I'm sorry. I never want to hurt you," he said, and kissed at Draco's temples. Draco pulled Harry into the chair, but Harry always wanted Draco to be the one in his lap, seemingly so he could press his face easily into Draco's hair. Draco let Harry have that bit of control, taking Draco's hips to settle him where he wanted, before wrapping his arms as tightly around Draco's waist as they would go. Like he expected Draco to make a run for it and escape forever.

"Occlumency was always going to be tough, Harry," Draco said, trying to find the words as Harry nuzzled his hair. At least he didn't think Harry was going to cry, nor have a respiratory fit like Draco might in his shoes, like he had sometimes when Aunt Bella pulled on a thread that shouldn't have been pulled. "You know... you know I don't think any less of you from what I saw..."

"How could you not?" Harry exclaimed, pulling back to stare at him almost accusingly. His green eyes were dry, but they would have been less frightening wet. Instead, there was that distance that Draco most feared in them, not only hopeless but unreachable, like Draco could sit there on top of him and remain a million miles away from whoever Harry Potter really was beneath the forced necessary facade of heroic goodness.

"Harry..." Draco wondered if Harry would welcome or flinch away from a kiss right now. "Harry, you know... you know my childhood wasn't exactly..."

"What?" Harry said lifelessly. Draco could still see the cupboard and its claustrophobic hold on the pupils of those broken eyes.

"You know that pureblood families," Draco began, and stopped himself. It wasn't the same, Harry had gone through so much worse. Harry had been neglected, while Draco had been given everything material he ever wanted, the only child, the heir, and he'd actually done things to deserve getting punished...

"Your father," Harry said slowly, eyes focusing just a bit on Draco. "Are you saying your father was cruel to you? Ron..." Harry frowned, and his hands threaded through Draco's hair, eyes focusing. Was this his savior complex coming to the fore to distract him? "Ron's always said that your family is... complicated. But that he didn't want to talk about it, just- that there's a price for you, for going against what your family believes in, and it's not one we can always see..."

"I didn't have a cupboard," Draco said tunelessly, "Just the Malfoy Manor cellars. I had everything I could ever want, I just got beaten sometimes, which is nothing compared to what you-"

"Beaten?" Harry said, staring in real horror. "Like Dobby said, when you got your wand... he said hexes, your father's walking stick, in the cellars- that wasn't the only time?" Draco nodded. "Did it happen all the time?" Draco shrugged wearily. "How could your godfather let this happen?"

Trust a Gryffindor to somehow find a way to turn this around on Severus. "He didn't know about it until I came to Hogwarts and he caught me stealing healing supplies- what? It's not *my* fault my family wouldn't give me any," Draco said defensively, blowing past the increased horror on Harry's face. "I didn't want to be a burden, but he figured out... he told me to use Langlock to keep my father away from me after, and it worked... except for after the World Cup when I had magical exhaustion, but that was just once, and that's why he took me back to Hogwarts early..."

"Is that why Remus and Sirius took you in?" Harry breathed in stricken guilt. "Oh God, I was such a *child*- I was so bitter you got to go with them when I didn't, when you, what you had to *face*- I got Dudley's second bedroom after I got home from Hogwarts the first year, it's been better since, I just go hungry sometimes, that's nothing compared to-"

"I don't want you to go back there," Draco insisted, gripping Harry's hands like his lifeline. "You're coming back to Grimmauld with me this summer, and damn what Dumbledore says- even if Sirius and Remus think you shouldn't- damn them all, I'll fight them, I'll put Imperius on them if I have to- you're never setting *foot* in Privet Drive again, I won't let them make you-"

"Draco," Harry said softly, stroking his hands, "I'm not scared of the Dursleys anymore. It's more just boring. Boring and lonely. And it was scary this past summer, now that the war's on and I'm worried about people getting hurt, but I'm not in physical danger- there were Dementors, but not danger from the Dursleys-"

"You," Draco said, staring into his eyes fiercely, and spoke with a conviction he did not know if he had ever mustered before for anything, "Are staying with me this summer. I'm never leaving you to be lonely like that again."

Because Sirius and Remus are *going to adopt you. I'll make sure of it.*

April 1, 1996. Chang's friend squeals under Veritaserum, Dumbledore's Army unmasked, I trip Potter and he falls on his face very satisfyingly. Dumbledore flees the school in disgrace. Inquisitorial Squad celebrates with Firewhisky.

Today was the day DA was going to be caught, and Draco had decided to let it happen. If that made him a traitor, well, so be it. He had full confidence that the Inquisitorial Squad could work just as well without his help, with Blaise probably taking up the leadership role he'd had. He'd seen his yearmates skulking around in their new roles, radicalized after the Quibbler article, and had just tried to avoid mentioning the widening gap between them in Quidditch practices. Sports and friendship, he could attempt to keep apolitical. Even if that was made difficult by the fact that in order to avoid any impression of having been guilty for

DA being caught, with his Quidditch teammates on the case, he'd have to be sure he was one of the ones they caught.

He managed to coax everyone out of dueling that day, insisting that they all ensure their Patronuses were in working order after Lavender Brown proved as colossally useless with making one as she was at not getting mauled by werewolves. Brown got frustrated at Draco goading her, and demanded to see his Patronus, which he had never shown. Which wasn't at all because he still wasn't completely confident in his ability to produce a Patronus right on call.

"What we really need is a Boggart or something," Harry said patiently. "That's how I learned, I had to conjure a Patronus while the Boggart was pretending to be a Dementor-"

"Would your Boggart still be a Dementor, do you think, Harry?" Draco asked.

"The Boggarts were in the maze for the Third Task last year," he said thoughtfully, and lots of the others looked interested in the story- including, to Draco's displeasure, Ginny- but Brown was undaunted.

"He can't keep giving it out to me about not trying hard enough," Brown whined, "When he hasn't ever even done one for the rest of us."

"That," Draco said, "Is because my Patronus is too frightening."

"It's not frightening, it's beautiful!" Harry protested before reddening slightly. Draco turned and couldn't help shooting him a look through his eyelashes, even as his mental clock expected Umbridge to be busting through the wall any second now.

"Well, you know," Draco said softly, scuffing his foot on the floor near Harry's, "Dangerous things can be beautiful. Don't you think? Alright, alright," he laughed at Brown's continued scowl. "Expecto patronum!"

Astaroth erupted out of the end of his wand, larger and brighter and more of an opaline silver than anyone else's. Some of the younger students shrieked, with more than a few diving out of the way as a half-sized dragon began to swoop majestically around the Room of Requirement. "It's this," Draco told Brown smugly, showing her his necklace. "He's a dragon. He's called the Antipodean Opaleye. Now what's your excuse?"

Then the excitement at the soaring dragon gave way to confusion, as Harry was pulled away from his admiring contemplation of the Opaleye by a far smaller creature. Dobby was down there, pulling at Harry's robes to get his attention. The sight of the fear on Dobby's face made the dragon go up in mist. "Dobby, what is it?" Draco asked, crouching down, and found that Dobby was trembling.

"Dobby has come to warn you... but the house-elves have been warned not to tell…"

Umbridge. Draco had wondered in the blue loop how it had seemed that Harry's group had already been fleeing before they arrived. Harry tried to grab Dobby to keep him from punishing himself for this disobedience to orders. Draco could only hope word of Dobby's

continued so-called misbehavior wouldn't spread and ruin things with Wooky and Nissy again. Luna ran in the way between Dobby and the wall, keeping him from impacting the hard stone. "No, Dobby, you don't have to punish yourself!" Luna called bravely, as Neville grabbed onto both of them to keep them from falling over.

"What's happened, Dobby?" Harry asked, holding Dobby in place with an air of command over the situation coming over him, and Draco held his breath.

"Harry Potter... Draco Malfoy... she... she..."

"Umbridge," Draco said impatiently. "Has she found out about us, Dobby?" Dobby nodded, and tried to kick himself. Draco got to his knees, grabbing his feet, and stared into those massive marble eyes resolutely. "Stop it. You don't have to punish yourself. You're no one's property to punish, do you hear me, Dobby?"

But perhaps the others, who were not as desirous as Draco of being caught, were not content to wait and hear a disquisition on house elf rights. There was nervous murmuring all around, and when Harry asked if Umbridge was coming, finally, Dobby nodded.

"WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?" Harry yelled to the petrified group. "RUN!"

Draco raced towards the bright plume of Luna's hair, but he saw Neville pulling her out, so he went towards Dobby instead, where Harry was trying to instruct him to go back to the kitchen, and not to punish himself. Even in the stampede around them, Draco felt a pang of warmth in his chest at Harry's goodness, always thinking of others' safety before his own. Hermione called for them to come, and Harry and Draco dragged Dobby out together, before letting him flee down the corridor. Harry ran towards the right, and Draco followed, only to fall back from a burst of light as someone yelled out, "Impedimenta!"

Harry slowed, nearly tripping, and Theo advanced on them from behind a vase, the same one Draco had hidden behind to trip Harry in the blue loop. There was a sharpness of triumph on his usually mild face that distorted his handsome features. "Professor! Harry Potter! Harry Potter is over here!" Then he saw Draco running back to Harry. "Draco? What are you doing here- Draco, get out of here!"

"Come on!" Draco yelled, trying to pull Harry with him, but it was too late. Umbridge ran around the corner faster than she should have been rightly capable of, with such a demonic grin on her face, the word *Cauterizo* came to his lips. But Draco kept it unspoken, and pocketed his wand.

"It's him! Harry Potter! Excellent work, Mr. Nott. 50 points to Slytherin. And..." She visibly paled at the sight of who was holding Harry, who looked to be thinking of drawing his own wand, while also deciding against it, face set like stone. Draco's face frightened Umbridge far more. "Mr. Malfoy. You... you must have been helping Mr. Nott at searching..."

"No," Draco said, eyes narrowed to sharpen his icy gaze like a dagger. "No, I'm with Harry."

"*Hem hem*," she went. "Well. I'll take Mr. Potter from here. Mr. Nott, you hop along and see if you can round up any more of them. Tell the others to look in the library- anybody out of

breath- check the bathrooms, Miss Parkinson can do the girls' ones- off you go- and- and you..." She faltered when she came to Draco.

"Mr. Zabini?" she called. Blaise hadn't been involved in this sordid business in the blue loop, but Pansy must have dragged him into it. Draco was almost amused by the realization, before he saw Blaise stroll around the corner with an unconscious, clearly Stunned Luna dragged by the collar. "Mr. Zabini, why don't you escort Mr. Malfoy back to the Slytherin dorm personally, to be sure nothing ill befalls him-"

"Take your hands off my cousin," Draco hissed in a voice more animal than human, "Or I'll take your hands off your *wrists*!" He drew his wand again, and Blaise dropped Luna like she had the Flagrante curse on her. Draco left Harry's side, running over to Luna, and Theo took a glaring Harry by the shoulders roughly, grabbing his wand and taking it.

"Umbridge!" Draco yelled. "Forget you saw Luna, or you *know* the consequences!"

"Mr. Zabini," Umbridge said, in a suddenly thinner, fainter voice, "Perhaps you might escort Mr. Malfoy and his cousin to the Ravenclaw common room first. These two seem to have been caught up in this by mistake."

"What do you mean?" Blaise frowned. "I caught her trying to flee with her ugly boyfriend-"

"You heard me!" Umbridge snapped. "You have your orders. Now come on, Potter!" she said, and took Harry away. Draco stared after them, then cast Enervate and woke Luna up.

"What do you have on Umbridge?" Blaise demanded as soon as it was just the three of them going down the hall, the sound of chasing echoing around the castle behind them. "That was crazy."

"Luna," Draco said, helping her along, "Are you alright? Was it Blaise who Stunned you?"

"Is Neville alright?" she asked blearily.

"It must be true love," Blaise sneered. "She was getting away fine, but Longbottom tripped, and she threw herself in front. Told him to run and got herself hit... I wouldn't have *aimed* for your cousin, Draco..." Fear entered his eyes for the first time. "You know I was just doing my job- AH!"

"Draco! Draco, let him go!" Luna cried, trying to pull Draco off Blaise. He had grabbed Blaise by the throat before he even thought about it, slamming his back against the wall of the hall. "Draco, he's your friend, isn't he- don't hurt him, I'm fine-"

"YOU ATTACKED LUNA!" Draco screamed, and when Blaise's hand inched towards his wand, he snarled, "Manibipiscatus!" Blaise's hands shot above his head, sticking to the stone, and then he really looked afraid. "YOU CURSED HER! You're dead, Blaise, you know it, you're DEAD-"

"Draco!" Luna flung herself bodily between them, keeping Draco's wand from casting anything more. "Draco, please, don't, not for me, I don't *want* you to, please..."

It took Draco a number of shuddering breaths before the red haze would clear from before his eyes. He turned away from Luna and Blaise and yelled, "VENTUS!"

Every door on every room in the corridor went flying off its hinges, suits of armor crashing down over moving staircases. A painting nearly fell on him, but rebounded off some invisible magical wall, to crash down with the splinters of wood at his feet.

Later, Draco would learn every room and corridor on the floor had its contents similarly upended. It was blamed on the chaos after the discovery of Dumbledore's Army.

"Draco, please, please," Luna kept pleading, and finally, Draco took a deep breath, turned around, and forced a smile.

"This can't be real," Blaise said, eyes not just full of terror but reevaluation, like he had placed Draco in one category and now had to find him another.

"No, it's fine, I'm fine," Draco said, pocketing his wand and raising his hands, as if he was the most innocent, harmless creature in the world. "Just had to blow off a little steam! I'm fine! Come on, Luna, Blaise, let's get back to our common rooms. All good here! Finite incantatem."

"So," Draco said, surveying his four dormmates and the I badges pinned to each of their chests. "So."

"What?" Vince said defiantly, but when Draco took another step towards him, both he and Greg cowered. Theo stepped towards him in return, dark blue eyes defiant, but Blaise grabbed Theo's arm, trying to pull him back.

"Don't, Theo," Blaise said warily. "It's like he's got a demon inside him. Trust me, you don't want to set him off."

"You counted that as being set off, yesterday?" Draco countered, baring his teeth wolfishly. "Oh, please, Blaise, if I *had* been set off- if my cousin hadn't been so kind as to save your sorry hide, after you had the temerity to *raise your wand to her*- and no, I don't care who you were *aiming* for-"

"You'd know all about that, wouldn't you?" Theo said coldly. "Aiming for one person and hitting another?" Blaise put his head in his hands, stepping behind Theo and seeming to decide that if Theo was so determined to die, who was he to stop him? "I'm talking about Pettigrew-"

"I thought you didn't know anything about any of that business, Theo," Draco said with exquisite venom. Perhaps he was still bitter about the fate his purloined shirt had met that night. "Working off Death Eater intelligence, are we?"

"We're going to be late for breakfast," Greg said anxiously.

"No one," Draco said grimly, "Is leaving this dorm until we have everything very, very clear between us. I think that would be the best for all of us, don't you?" Theo opened his mouth, and Draco laughed stridently. "Oh, are you scared to be sharing a dorm with a murderer?"

"You admit it, then," Theo said evenly, and Draco snorted impatiently.

"Your fathers all told you this summer, and you told Blaise," Draco said, rolling his eyes. "Don't act like you haven't always known. You're just throwing smoke. That isn't the issue. The issue is that Blaise cursed my cousin, and I will have restitution."

"Do you want us to quit the Inquisitorial Squad?" Vince asked in a small voice.

"No," Draco said, grinning rather manically. "No, by all means, have your fun! I don't-" He tried to calm himself. "I don't want us to be enemies-"

"And that's why you were running around in something called *Dumbledore's Army*-"

"And you're all marked as part of an *inquisitorial* squad, Blaise, none of us have exactly been apolitical in our choice of extracurricular activities-"

"Theo didn't join up until you named his father in the Quibbler," Blaise protested, "And neither did-"

"Whatever," Draco sighed, "But the one that matters is Quidditch, so-"

"Theo just called you a murderer," Blaise said incredulously, "And you want to talk about *Quidditch*?"

"Listen, you lot," Draco said crossly. "If you're going to get all bent out of shape every time I threaten to kill you, or murder somebody or other, we're *never* going to win the Quidditch Cup."

That statement was met with a more traumatized silence than he had been counting on. "I mean, uh, yeah, Draco," said Blaise, who had managed by his point to back away so much, he had hidden his body completely behind Vince and Greg. "Whatever you say."

"Blaise, why are you cowering?" Draco asked, exasperated. "You used to be the one person who was never afraid of me."

"Draco, you were just talking about restitution," Theo said tiredly. "We're all going to miss breakfast, seriously. Tell us what you want and we'll do it. We don't want to be enemies either, okay? We're not that dumb."

"Okay," Draco said, "Here are my demands to ensure a happy, healthy, congenial environment as dormmates where no one feels unloved or gets the Cruciatus curse cast on them in their sleep. One, none of you ever, *ever* lay hands or spells on any of my people again. That means Luna, Hermione, Ron, Harry, and Neville. Those five. Anyone else, fair game. Though I'll be pissed if you kill the Weasley twins. *Ginny* Weasley, have at her, go crazy-"

"Okay, fine," said Theo resolutely. "But we're allowed to dock points now with these badges. Do you want us to leave off Gryffindor?"

"No," Draco said, deflating. "Do as you like. Just don't threaten those five for real. That's all. That, and... I don't want things to change with Quidditch. Blaise, I- I didn't mean to blow up on you that bad last night, I just- Luna, she's been through a lot. I'm protective of her. Really protective. After the Chamber of Secrets and all... I couldn't help it. But I'm not- I won't hold a grudge if you don't. I promise."

When Blaise shook his hand, he imagined Blaise meant it just about as much as Draco did.

Theo was the only one to walk with Draco at breakfast, or sit anywhere near him and his place marker of THIEF, BLOOD TRAITOR, LIAR at the Slytherin table. "So it's true," he whispered in his ear. "You really killed Peter Pettigrew. And you had your boyfriend blame the Dark Lord..."

"He's not my boyfriend," Draco hissed irritably, and Theo's eyebrows shot up.

"Oh," he said, tilting his head with a slow, analytical stare. "That's what you deny? Not the Killing curse? Is it... is it true you were trying to kill the Dark Lord?"

Draco smirked. "What do you think, Theo? Do you think I'm capable of that?"

Theo swallowed hard, and then leaned in and whispered in Draco's ear, breath warm on the earlobe, "I think you're capable of anything."

Easter Sunday

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Harry was hardly one to ever miss a trick when it came to Draco, and seeing Draco and Theo whispering at breakfast seemed to be one of the many annoyances added to his day. The rumors had spread throughout the school about the scene that had ensued in Dumbledore's office once Harry was delivered there by Umbridge, with all the talk of Dumbledore's daring escape.

Harry had already been glum about the end of Dumbledore's Army, his own guilt from getting Dumbledore blamed for something he hadn't actually been involved in, and the new prowling of the Inquisitorial Squad about like hyenas who had finally climbed up the food chain and ousted the lions from the top. Draco felt like laughing watching it, remembering himself on the other side of it: *Let them have their moment in the sun, it won't last.* But it couldn't be pleasant without foreknowledge, even with the mass disruption caused by Weasley's Wildfire Whiz-Bangs. And the fact that every professor seemed to relish making Umbridge get rid of them without lifting a finger themselves. Draco himself was having a grand old time witnessing the chaos, without any obligation to stop it or fear for its results this time.

Harry had to cope with Umbridge's interrogation attempts as well, aided by Veritaserum that she had summarily demanded from a disgruntled Severus. But the Whiz-Bangs had gotten Harry out of her office, and Severus's grumblings as they passed by each other after dinner had Draco climbing up the marble steps instead, following the flood of Gryffindors in hopes of catching Harry. He knew he should warn him, given the incriminating things he could have dragged out of him, about Draco included, and it felt additionally incumbent upon him given that he himself had been the one to brew that batch of Veritaserum, in Extra Potions last year.

"Harry!" Draco called, not caring who heard, and cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled, "HARRY POTTER!" Halfway up the moving staircase in front of Gryffindor Tower, Harry turned, and then waited at the portal with the Fat Lady for the staircase to move down and let Draco up after him. Ron had stopped to wait with Harry, but when he saw the dark look on Harry's face, he seemed to judge it more auspicious to just go into his common room. Draco waved after him.

"Don't even think about it," the Fat Lady warned Draco crossly, before he took Harry by the arm and led him down the walkway, behind a large case of armor where no one would see. It wasn't like they could go to the now-decimated Room of Requirement. Draco wondered if Harry had his Invisibility Cloak, and told himself he hadn't just pulled Harry aside for hormonal reasons. Though Harry did look *gorgeous* when he was angry.

"I can't stay long," Draco began, "I have Quidditch practice soon," which had been the worst possible way to begin the conversation.

"Oh, right," Harry snarled, "With *Nott*. Well, go on, then, you must not want to miss a *second* with him!" At Draco's startled look, he put his hands on Draco's chest and pressed him up against the wall behind the knight. "You didn't think I saw you whispering with him at breakfast? After he caught me and turned me in to Umbridge- if he hadn't gotten me, Dumbledore wouldn't have had to *go*- and you're just over there, having the time of your life *flirting* with him-"

"Calm down," Draco hissed, though nothing seemed to make Harry less calm than being told that. "I wasn't- how many times do I have to tell you I don't fancy Theo-"

"He fancies you!" Harry exploded, hands clenching hard on Draco's robes, and one tugged Draco's Slytherin tie out of place, knotting around it. Draco felt his knees go a bit wobbly, body inappropriately alight with longing at Harry's ferocity. He had never quite understood the effect Harry had on him, and the longer it was they had this *thing* or whatever between them, the worse it seemed to get. Seeing Harry this jealous made him want to be somewhere truly alone, so he could let Harry take it out on him...

"What?" Harry demanded. "You aren't going to try and deny it?"

"I'm here to tell you," Draco said crossly, "That Umbridge tried to use Veritaserum on you- she took some from my godfather's stores, he's fuming- and she'll probably try again, so be careful with everything you put in your mouth-"

"Isn't that what I should be saying to you?" Harry breathed, eyes falling to Draco's lips. "You just protected your cousin yesterday and left *me* to your new *boyfriend*- where is *your* mouth going, Draco? How did *you* get out of getting punished?"

Explaining that he'd threatened essentially to burn off Umbridge's hand wasn't great, but it was better than Harry thinking he'd performed ungodly favors for Theo to weasel his way out. "You don't have any trust in me at all, do you?"

"How am I supposed to? This- you and I- it's *secret*, and you don't ever act like you care about it- about *me*- I'm still your last priority, you're still probably always making fun of me with your Slytherin friends-"

"Harry," Draco groaned. "You're projecting. Ask Luna, I nearly *killed* one of my Slytherin friends last night- what do you want? For me to get on my knees and beg for forgiveness?"

"Yeah, that'd be a start," Harry snorted, and Draco raised an eyebrow.

Be careful what you wish for, when wishing from a dragon.

"Alright," Draco said, and fell gracefully to his knees, in that small hollow behind the armor.

Harry's back hit the armor, clanging. He stared at Draco, stunned in the torchlight, green eyes and pretty pink lips falling open very wide.

"Well?" Draco teased, tilting his head up to survey Harry from where he was knelt at his feet, and what a view. What a bloody view. "Is it time for me to beg now?"

"Oh my God," Harry breathed. His fingers went out to run through Draco's hair, as furtively as if by their own volition. "What are you *doing*, you're *mad*..."

"What you told me to," Draco pouted, "Don't you like that?" and shivered as Harry's fingers took his chin, and tilting it up so their gazes could meet. It should not have felt half as right as it did, sitting there subservient at Harry's feet.

"I didn't mean it, not literally," Harry said breathlessly, but his thumb stroked Draco's chin. At least Harry looked somewhat affected by this tableau as well, if only through sheer disbelief.

"No, you *said*," Draco whined, and folded his hands together before him docilely. "I'm sorry, Harry. I didn't *mean* to be bad. Tell me what I need to do for you to forgive me."

"I..." Harry licked his lips, and pushed up his glasses before touching Draco's face again. "You really don't like Nott?"

"No," Draco said emphatically, and let out a little keening moan as Harry's fingers stroked through his hair. "Yeah, he fancies me, obviously. I don't *care*, Harry, I want *you.*"

"You don't..." Harry stroked Draco's cheek along with his hair, eyes softening. "You don't ever wish you were with him instead of me?"

I've been *with him. As the Muggles say, been there, done that, got the T-shirt. I'm not exactly overeager to repeat the experience.* "I could have him if I wanted-"

"But his father's a Death Eater, so you're on different sides. If you weren't, *tell* me you would still pick *me*."

A smirk grew across Draco's face. "I'd *beg* for you, Harry Potter. Do you think I'd do that for just anyone? But if you're not convinced, I'm happy to show exactly *why* I'd always pick *you*..."

Harry's hands knotted in Draco's hair and pulled him up into a fervent kiss, Draco's back hitting the wall again. His hands wrapped around Harry's shoulders, linking around his neck, legs weak as his weight fell against the rough grit of the stone. "Don't ever," Harry whispered, "Let him *touch* you," and pulled Draco's tie so hard, he couldn't breathe.

"You're so," Draco moaned, laughing, "So *possessive*... really, does that befit... mmm... the savior of the wizarding world... really, the great Chosen One Saint Potter shouldn't be so-"

"Shut *up*," Harry groaned. "Why wouldn't I be possessive of *you*..." Draco tangled their tongues together, trying to breathe through his nose even as he got lightheaded. "You're so hard to hold onto," Harry gasped, and kept kissing him as if that could change it. Draco's own hands were gripping at Harry's neck too hard, but it didn't matter. Contact between them this fierce was too addictive to care for anything but his body begging *more, more, more Harry, more...*

"Harry, if you don't come work on your Herbology essay, I don't think you'll- oh," Hermione sighed, stopping there before the armor, with a long-suffering air radiating from the other side of the metal. "Draco? I take it from those sounds that it's you back there with him?"

Draco laughed, and pressed a quick final kiss to Harry's lips before stepping out from behind the armor. "If it wasn't," Draco said happily, "I would trust you, as my friend, to beat the living daylights out of whoever else was there, Striker. Strike 'em good."

"Hermione," Harry whined, following Draco with a sullen air, "Couldn't it have waited?"

"I'll be late to Quidditch practice soon anyway," Draco said with a stupid grin. He poked Harry in the scar, before giving Hermione a quick hug and racing down the stairs.

As he descended, he could hear Harry complaining to Hermione that she was such a buzzkill, and Hermione telling Harry that she didn't think Draco would want to date anyone without at *least* seven OWLs.

They had a two-week Easter break this year, which was needed after the fallout from Dumbledore's Army being discovered. Going home to Grimmauld was far preferable to the blue loop. Going home to Malfoy Manor in fifth year then had meant his first ever meeting with Aunt Bella. Instead, he and Harry were sent by Portkey directly from McGonagall's office to Grimmauld, a bit of tense security on her part that she did a poor job at playing off. But she got them there safely, much to the excitement of Sirius, who nearly floored them both with hugs upon their arrival.

Remus had somehow coaxed Kreacher into making them a welcome home stew that Good Friday, and told them at dinner that Kreacher would be helping him with a feast for Easter Sunday. He was on the lookout for another helper in the kitchen, and Draco, Harry, and Sirius all exchanged looks, before Remus threw his hands up and declared that if Sirius wanted to marry him, he could bestir himself to the kitchen for a few hours.

Sirius hemmed and hawed, but eventually gave in. They were both still wearing their rings, and Draco didn't miss them frequently holding hands under the table, looking even more the giddy lovebirds than in January. Draco had no intention of letting them detect any such attachment between him and Harry, even though Harry reacted to Sirius's invitation to start clearing out Regulus's old room for himself with suspicious enthusiasm.

But after all, that seemed a good sign Harry could end up spending the summer with them rather than the Dursleys, a prospect Draco very much hoped for, with or without the prospect of adoption. At least some of the summer would seem only fair, and Draco intended to keep his resolution to fight for it. So that was more than enough to explain why Harry was happy up on the top floor with Draco, without any need to clue Sirius or Remus in on... ulterior motives.

Those ulterior motives were hard to keep out of Draco's mind, though. They were both heading to 'check out Regulus's room' after dinner with perhaps suspicious rapidity, when Remus called them back. By the time he was done delivering his extremely verbose warning

about the consequences should the two fifth-years make any more secret excursions outside Grimmauld, Draco was awash with guilt. But as they finally got to sprint up the stairs, elevating their trunks behind them, it was frustration coming to the fore again. Harry didn't take a step into Regulus's room past levitating his suitcase in, before running into Draco's room and slamming the door behind him.

"Colloportus," Draco cast, "Inmotus, Arendi," before a final "Cave inificum" for good measure had them truly isolated and soundproofed. Then Harry was stalking towards where Draco had already set up camp on the bed, the bluebell flames and light wreath back in their usual place above. Draco was in the middle of pulling off his shoes, and Harry kissed him and pushed him onto his back before he could even get both off. "Mmm, Harry, wait..." He was still in his uniform, and Harry sat back to let him kick off his other shoe, and get off his robes, vest, and tie. Harry pulled his jumper over his head, exposing his torso as his T-shirt rode up, and Draco grabbed it and pulled them both off, laughing.

Harry's eyes shot to him, startled. Draco rolled them over, bracing his hands on Harry's chest with a devilish grin. Merlin, it had been too long since he'd seen this body, let alone touched it. Harry looked like he remembered from their bath together in fourth-year, just older, more compact and solid, with more of a light dusting of dark hair over his bare skin and taut muscles. "Don't worry, Harry," Draco purred. "I just want to look at you. The nasty Slytherin isn't going to do anything wicked to you, I promise."

He drew his hands down Harry's chest, as if to belie that promise right away. Harry leaned up and kissed him by means of tugging his mouth down, latching onto his lip with his teeth and making him fall against his chest dragging him by it. Draco moaned helplessly into his mouth, hips squirming as he settled down fully on top of Harry for the first time since January. Lying down together felt far more fraught, after months of kissing and teasing and this ever-mounting want.

It was never far from Draco's head, the steps further they could take. But he was the one with the experience, experience he couldn't even talk about. It would have to be Harry to suggest anything, his conscience said, even if his body knew how easily he could seduce Harry, given half a chance. And this felt like about fifteen chances at once, all the momentum pushing them together, the selfish thrill of this wild, powerful, hopelessly lovable boy belonging only to him-

Harry rolled them over, flipping Draco on his back and leaving him a bit winded. Harry didn't mind Draco on his lap, but when they were lying down like this, he always seemed to like to be the one on top, as if winning a fistfight, always clear who was in control. "Don't," Draco gasped, "Leave any marks, or... make sure you remember to remind me, so I can... mmm, spell them away, *fuck*..."

He hated how much he loved it when Harry kissed his neck. He always pretended he didn't like it, squirming away, loathing himself for the spikes of rolling heat it sent through him, the helpless need to keep being kissed there. Better to be deprived of it than admit how much he wanted Harry to keep dragging his teeth at the pulse point, to mark him up like he wanted the whole world to know Draco was his. "Stop it, Harry, you're going to leave bruises..."

"It's not my fault if I do, you're so pale," Harry grumbled, pressing softer, soothing kisses down. "You leave more bruises than me anyway."

"That is not true," Draco whined, tossing his head, and Harry pulled his hair in playful argument. He undid the clasp on Draco's hair to get two full handfuls of it. It made Draco melt, the casual presumptuousness in that gesture, like it was up to him to decide about how Draco's hair should be, whether he wanted it free to hold in his hands.

"Oh- Merlin, *Harry*," Draco whimpered, as Harry pulled his hair to make him expose his neck again, kissing all up and down with the heat of Harry's golden skin closer with his torso bare above his. His pulse was alive in his ears, like Harry was pulling all of his senses apart. "You're trying to bruise me, aren't you... what, do you *want* them to... mmm... to figure out..."

"You just make the best noises," Harry whispered, "When I bite your neck," and did again to demonstrate. Draco whimpered despite himself, though he glared at Harry after. Harry attacked Draco's mouth until he was flat prone on his back again, their legs starting to fall entwined together, and Draco tried to keep his mind on something besides just Harry.

"Don't you have anything better to do," Draco gasped, "Than maul me, you..." His mind wasn't coming up with insults at its usual speed, especially when Harry started necking him again. "You... don't you want to, ah, your new room- and we should- ah- practice, um, Occlumency sometimes... *fuck*," he laughed, and just threw his head back, luxuriating in the feeling, home in his own room in Grimmauld with the blue lights over them like they were underwater and no one could swim deep enough to reach them, like they were floating in their own world in the soundless deep and no one could touch them but each other. Harry's mouth, Harry's weight, his skin, the flashes as he pulled back and smiled before leaning back in of those perfect green eyes...

He didn't know how he could ever have thought the red line was purgatory. If this was death that the mirror had sent him to, he couldn't imagine any more perfect image of heaven.

But the better things were with him and Harry, the more it made him remember his promise not to let Dumbledore send Harry back to the Dursleys again. Draco spent a good amount of time on Good Friday and the next day drifting off thinking while others were talking, trying to plan a foolproof approach to broach the topic with Remus and secure some concrete promise, without having to betray what he'd seen in Harry's head about his childhood. Luckily enough, he was approached about Harry first.

He was standing before the family tapestry, theoretically thinking about ways to get Remus on the tapestry but really just staring at the names on it, when he heard a throat cleared behind him, and then the incredibly subtle question of, "Say, how are your Occlumency lessons with Harry going? And, ah, if he was going to be hypothetically given a test on Occlumency by, say, Dumbledore, do you think he would pass it?"

Such a masterful lesson in thoughtful subterfuge was delivered, of course, by Sirius and not Remus, but you couldn't have everything. And say this for Sirius, it made it unnecessary for Draco to confess he'd been eavesdropping and heard the tail end of their row with

Dumbledore. After casting Inmotus, it barely took much dissembling to seem surprised as he extracted the whole story from Sirius, acting as if he'd never heard it before. Sirius began, "You can't tell Harry any of this, at least not yet..."

Draco nodded obediently, and out it came.

The only new part was the addition of another meeting, at some point after the first, where Dumbledore informed Sirius he had learned more about the nature of Harry's connection to Voldemort, and did not think Harry as dangerous as he had first supposed, save in the mental link. And that meant that if the Occlumency lessons went well enough- and they would have to go very well indeed, given the risks involved- the only remaining question would be Harry's protection.

Sirius took Draco's act at face value, agitated enough even at a retell to force an objective listener to perhaps give some credence to Dumbledore's assessment that, in Sirius's words, "*And* he says he thinks that after I went to Azkaban so young, I still have some maturing to do to catch up to my physical age now! That I'm not mentally even that much older than Harry, and I act like his friend, not a guardian! Can you believe that?"

"Rubbish," Draco said loyally, although sounding convincing there took rather more dissembling.

"But now that it will be me *and* Remus, that's different. He trusts Remus," Sirius said happily. "So once Remus and I are married- and that will be soon- the legality with the Ministry will be difficult, but in practical terms, Remus and I can both be his parents then. It's only natural, without parents of his own, for his godfather to adopt him, and then his godfather's partner too. So, anyway, then there's your part, Draco, the Occlumency..."

Draco delivered his objective assessment of Harry's lessons, perhaps more positive than strictly truthful, with only half his mind on it. The rest of him was wrestling with himself. He had thought he would feel differently, more magnanimous about Harry's adoption, after their relationship changed. *Certainly* after he learned the truth about the Dursleys. *Anyone* would. At least anyone decent. And he had, he really had, but-

The knowledge it would be Remus too, somehow, had Draco as bitter as he had when he first overheard it all, an acid bile building up in his stomach up to his throat that he could physically feel constraining what was now a mere *show* of graciousness. *You have parents*, he reminded himself, trying not to stare at his mother's name on the family tree, right above his own. *Right, yes, parents. A father who never loved you, and a mother you left behind to the Dark Lord and* Aunt Bella...

"Draco?" Sirius prompted, touching his elbow with a jocular shove, rather than the soft kindly touch Remus would have used. "Hey, Frankenstein, you still with me?" Merlin only knew what Sirius had gotten on to blathering about.

Draco forced a contemplative expression. "No, just wondering..." He took his fingers and traced the space around Sirius's blotch. "I still haven't made any progress on putting you back on the tapestry, let alone... you know, putting Remus on. Or, I guess, uh... putting Harry on too." He traced an imaginary line from Sirius's blotch where Remus would go. And then,

between the two, one for Harry, and his chest felt like the talon brand had just been seared into the center of it.

But of course, the brand was only present on Sirius's hand, touching the tapestry beside his. "That's okay, Draco, there's still time. But you- you weren't looking over here." Sirius's eyes went to *Narcissa Black Malfoy,* and apparently there were things even Sirius Black wasn't too oblivious to notice.

Draco bit his lip, and the truth came out as if to spite him. "I'm helping all of you, but Mother... I told her to leave, I wrote her a letter, before I robbed Aunt Bella... I told her she had to leave soon, and she didn't." Sirius's next blunt question, whether Severus had tipped Draco off about the breakout of Azkaban, Draco completely ignored. "And we'll be having a lamb dinner you and Remus make us tomorrow for Easter. While Mother..."

"Remus said you sent her a package," Sirius said with an uneasy look, his snowdrop ring glinting as his hand dropped. "Before the school year started."

"Just earrings," Draco bit out, "House Black earrings, ones that didn't get melted down for that ring. Because she is a Black, we are family, she's your family too- your cousin, and we're just abandoning her and- and trying to be happy, and she-" To Draco's mortification, he felt tears threatening at the corners of his eyes, another painfully acidic prickling.

"I didn't think you and your mother were close," Sirius said awkwardly.

Not in this lifetime. "We used to be," Draco said tightly, biting his tongue against the tears and blinking fast. "We haven't been for a while, though. Because I chose that. *I chose that.* And now..." *And now you three can just put together your perfect family while mine falls apart.* "Now she's all alone." *I'm all alone.* "And she does love me. Or she did. I don't know. *I* love her. I can't help it. She's my mother. I don't want Aunt Bella to hurt her because of me..."

"Draco," Sirius sighed, pushing his long dark hair out of his way, so sleek and handsome and well-kept now, it was a testimony to happiness, so much so that it was like his happiness was being taken from elsewhere else, leeched out from another and traded for their ruin. "Do you not think she's where she wants to be?"

"I know," Draco took a deep breath. "I know the bargain I made. What I gained. And what I lost. I don't... I don't know if *she* understands. The bargain she's made. If she will, until... until it's too late." He bit his tongue so hard to force back tears, he almost tasted blood, but at least it felt the tears were receding.

"What do you want to do?" Sirius asked bravely, ever the Gryffindor. "Should we find her? Try and break her out of Malfoy Manor and rescue her?" He indeed looked ready to launch onto an impromptu rescue mission at a moment's notice, as if he needed the same speech Hermione had given Draco after the bank robbery. Oh, yes, Dumbledore had been completely wrong to question Sirius's maturity.

"Even if we could," Draco said wearily, "Nothing's that simple, is it? She'd have to want to go."

To his surprise, Sirius reached out and clasped his arm, strong and sure, his dark eyes fully present, and understanding. "When I was your age, Draco, I left my family behind too. You know that, right?"

Draco nodded, eyes going back to Sirius's part of the tree. "Oh, yes, Great-Aunt Walburga. She must have been so *difficult* to abandon." Sirius's finger traced down to the name *Regulus*, which perhaps seemed to stare out at him with something of the same accusation as *Narcissa* did to Draco. Except Regulus was already long dead. "You didn't want me to blast *him* off the tapestry," Draco recalled. "You were upset at the idea."

"He was Slytherin Seeker at school, you know," Sirius said, and looked closer to tears than Draco in a second, though he fought them back too. "Just like you. He was really good. Really, really good. Better than you, maybe..." He gave Draco a chance to get mad, but he didn't. "Not at tactics, but... he was vicious. Ruthless. And he never got- never got much older than that. He wasn't- he was just like my mother. Kreacher bloody worshiped him. The perfect son. But if he'd gotten older, gotten a chance to- I don't know, actually grow up, maybe he could have been more. Maybe he could have changed. Or maybe he would have just been an obedient Death Eater. Maybe he would have gone right to Azkaban with his favorite fucking aunt, but- but we'll never *know*..."

"Maybe he could have played professional Quidditch," Draco offered weakly, and Sirius let out a shaky gasp and hugged Draco, stepping forward and enveloping him in his arms tightly. It was a new experience, when not greeting or parting, and it lasted longer. It felt like Sirius needed him to hold onto, the presence of someone who understood the guilt of abandoning your family, to insulate himself from that abandoned one's ghost.

But *Mother* wasn't a ghost.

At least, not yet.

Draco hugged Sirius more tightly.

The earliest sign that first Easter dinner together as a family might not go as planned was the arrival of Severus. Draco's immediate fear was that he was injured from his work spying. He jumped up from the table and ran to fuss over his godfather as soon as Severus Apparated in. But he found no wounds, nor the telltale tremor of a recent Cruciatus. Severus brushed him aside, heading straight for Sirius. "You know," he said coldly, "That a wedding on the solstice is exactly what Bellatrix is expecting-"

"Trust you to show up and ruin the surprise," Sirius sighed, and Harry and Draco exchanged confused stares. "Okay, we were getting ready to tell you that before Sniv-"

"Severus," Remus said, a pleasant smile appearing glued onto his face. "You've come just in time to join us for the meal. I hope you like lamb."

Severus looked like he'd sooner curse all four of them than sit down. But at Remus's unflinching politeness, summoning one of the unused chairs to the table, he sank down with a

huff.

"Kreacher?" Remus called, and with a distinct grumbling sound, another place setting appeared. Remus cut a generous piece of lamb and began to serve the sides. Severus cast a derisive look down at the snowdrop ring on the hand serving him, before taking his knife and bringing it down in the way.

"Believe it or not, Lupin," Severus said, radiating a chill so sizable it was a wonder the fireplace didn't give up and extinguish itself, "I am also in possession of a pair of hands."

"Take as much as you like, there's more in the kitchen," Remus said, undeterred, and smiled purposefully at everyone at the table. "Draco, isn't it nice your godfather can be here to join us?"

Draco stole looks at Harry and then Sirius, both of whom looked as though they'd sooner spend their holiday with Nagini. "Well, *I'm* happy he's here," he said with blunt honesty, and smiled weakly over at Severus. Severus gave Draco's red Arsenal hoodie an unimpressed look, and then began to shovel lamb into his mouth at a pace of real hunger.

"Long meeting with Voldemort?" Sirius asked sharply at the sight, and Remus sighed.

"Severus seems to have some concerns over our wedding plans. Perhaps we should get that discussion out of the way first, before any other... small talk," Remus said tightly, the only person holding this back from going south right away.

"Fine," Sirius said, and Draco took his hand off Harry's thigh, where it had been resting under the table since they sat down. "Of course Bella knows it's then. It's a tradition in House Black for couples to marry on the summer solstice. There's a special ritual for it, it's supposed to grant luck, and, well, fertility... virility, I should say in our case..." Severus stared down into his mashed potatoes as if he was trying to mentally transfigure them into a self-propelling potato to bludgeon Sirius to oblivion. "And yes, Remus and I are planning to abide by that tradition."

"I did say I thought it would give a better chance of managing to add Uncle Remus to the tapestry," Draco said, with the *Uncle Remus* slipping out inopportunely for their current audience. He got a contemptuous enough look from Severus to wilt into his own potatoes. "Uncle Sirius, that's great! I would have pegged you for the sort to waste years sitting on an engagement..." *But you need Remus to adopt Harry with you.*

"I've waited long enough," Sirius said, at the same as Remus said,

"No one at this table has any illusions we live in a world where time can be wasted anymore."

Severus looked up at that while still stuffing his face, staring at Remus so fixedly that even Remus flinched back a bit. No one but Severus had eaten a bite since Severus sat down, but Draco forced himself to bite into some of the rosemary lamb, which tasted like ashes in his mouth. "Bellatrix married Rodolphus on the solstice," Sirius explained to Harry and Draco, "And your parents married then too. This year, it's June 21st. Right after OWLs. Term isn't

done yet, but we'd already secured permission from Dumbledore to have some special guests leave Hogwarts for the weekend to attend... heavily guarded and secure, of course..."

"And I can assure you," Severus said, throwing his fork down after having speedily demolished his entire large serving of lamb, "It will not be secure. No amount of guard will be enough. You cannot imagine the enthusiasm in the Dark Lord's ranks for disrupting this occasion, and not merely from your charming cousin, Black. I have just sat through hours and hours of gratuitous planning at Malfoy Manor, of the horrors that will be visited should you be foolish enough to *hold* this wedding-"

"We can find a secure location," Remus said tentatively. "We have not yet chosen one, nor will we until right before the occasion, for the sake of secrecy. Albus may no longer be at Hogwarts, but he has pledged to assist us in that-"

"So we're invited? We get to come?" Harry asked excitedly, ignoring Severus's arctic stare. "Draco and I? Will Hermione and Luna be invited too? The Weasleys? The Longbottoms?"

"Of course," Sirius said proudly, "Everyone is invited. We'll find a way to make it safe, whatever the Death Eaters claim. Snape is overreacting. If Dumbledore says it's safe, it's safe. Don't worry, Harry, the whole Order will be there-"

Severus slammed his hand down on the table. "AND THEY ALL KNOW THAT!" he bellowed. "This risk is ridiculous- for a ceremony with no legal stature to begin with-"

"So that means it doesn't *matter*?" Remus asked, starting to sound irritated himself.

Severus bristled further. "This is life and death, you vain, selfish-"

"Every *day* is life and death!" Sirius interrupted, radiating menace now. "You're just picking a fight because you don't have anyone to spend Easter with except Death Eaters, and you can't stand that Remus and I are happy now-"

"No one is *jealous*, only nauseated!" Severus growled. "Call off the wedding *now*-"

"You don't give us orders, Snape!" Sirius retorted hotly. "Take it up with Dumbledore-"

"Why do you insist on assembling all of your side together like sitting ducks as one convenient target-"

"*Your* side, you say?" Sirius echoed, rising to his feet with a start. "Don't you mean *our* side, Snivellus? Getting a little too cozy with your old pals? You do love *Malfoys*, don't you? How do you think it makes Draco feel, knowing that his so-called godfather loves being the lapdog of the father who treated him like dirt his entire life- *you'd* be throwing a wedding with your beloved *Lucius* if he'd have ever looked twice at you-"

Severus leapt to his feet too, drawing his wand like lightning. Then Sirius had his wand out, though Remus was getting up and gesturing for them to stop. "You know nothing of what you speak, Black," Severus spat, "Nothing," and brandished his wand menacingly.

"Put your wands away at the table!" Remus ordered, but for once, even Sirius ignored him.

"I know you're in too deep with those people!" Sirius retorted. "*Lily* always said that you-"

"How dare you!" Severus screamed. "How *dare* you speak of *her* to *me*- LANG-"

Draco threw himself bodily between them, which seemed to be the only thing that kept his favorite curse from being applied to his favorite uncle at the Easter table. "Severus, please-"

"GO UPSTAIRS!" Sirius bellowed.

When Harry and Draco just stood there frozen, Remus sighed and touched them both on the shoulder, a resigned look on his face. "Go upstairs, boys," Remus ordered more calmly, face rigid and white. Harry went to obey. But Draco remained there stubbornly.

"He's outnumbered," Draco said, looking over to Severus. But Severus slapped the table again, making the platter of candied fruits capsize down the table and over the carpets.

"UPSTAIRS! NOW!" Severus bellowed just as ferociously. At that, Draco did obey, grabbing Harry by the hand and sprinting towards the stairs. They could hear screaming as they made their way up, names spoken that shouldn't be, James and Lily and Lucius and Narcissa and Peter and Bellatrix and Voldemort like bombs dropped into what had been an idyllic spring holiday, but at least there were no curses or loud bangs of magic before Draco had them up inside his room.

"Inmotus!" Draco cast, and sounds from below were no longer audible. Harry was breathing hard, with what looked to be more anger than exertion.

"How dare he?" Harry yelled, and Draco tried to calm his own breath.

"I *know*," Draco seethed. "As if he knows anything about Severus *or* my family, let alone implying such filthy things about my father and my *godfather*-"

Harry turned on him. "No, I mean, how dare *Snape*? How can he just show up here on Easter Sunday, just demanding they call off their wedding like it's his decision-"

"He's the only spy we've got in the Order, if it's anyone's call it should be his-"

"No, Sirius and Remus were right, it's *Dumbledore's* call, and that's not even the point! It's the way he was *talking* about it! He can't just act like their wedding doesn't ever matter! Just because *he's* never been in love doesn't mean-"

"That's not true!"

"Oh, you mean with your father? Was Sirius right? Why didn't you ever tell me that he-"

"No, with your-" Draco almost said *with your mother.* But that would be a worse betrayal of Severus than he could ever countenance. "You don't know him! None of you do! Severus is just trying to keep everyone safe, instead of acting like we're not even in a war-"

"No, he's just going after old grudges! He hates them like he's always hated me, he'll take any excuse to get in their way- Sirius is right, he can't stand that they're happy and he's miserable-

"

"STOP ACTING LIKE YOU KNOW HIM!"

"STOP DEFENDING HIM!"

Draco had cast Inmotus to keep out any yelling from outside. Now he was realizing it had been a good idea to stifle the fighting within. "I'll always defend Severus, *always*, you *know* that-"

"Over Sirius and Remus? Over *me*?"

"HE SAVED UNCLE SIRIUS'S LIFE! There wouldn't be a wedding without him, there wouldn't be a Sirius Black at all- always with your Gryffindor ingratitude-"

"He saved him from the Dementors after he *put* him there-"

"*I* wouldn't be alive without Severus! I'm never turning my back on him! We're a package deal! So if you can't handle that, you can't handle me, and there's the fucking door-"

"YOU CAST AN IMPERTURBABLE CHARM, YOU BELLEND-"

"LEARN TO TAKE DOWN MAGICAL BARRIERS, YOU ILLITERATE FUCK-"

Harry and Draco stared at each other breathless, panting hard, and then Draco shoved Harry. Harry shoved him back, and again, and again until Draco fell onto his back over silver sheets, and they were kissing, Harry on top of him panting against his mouth like they had both ran for hours. Draco seized Harry's shoulders, grip vindictive, trying to kiss the life out of Harry, trying to force in his point with his lips if his words couldn't make a dent. It felt like Harry was trying to do the same, like if he could take control of the kiss, then he could win.

And for once, Draco wasn't about to let him, rolling them over so he was on top and Harry sprawled out beneath him, dark hair infuriatingly gorgeous across the opal sheen of the pillows. Draco took Harry's glasses, putting them aside on the table. Harry surged up sucking at Draco's mouth like it was his only source of air, mouth sending Draco's mind reeling, like Harry could drain every thought from it if he kissed him long enough and just replace it with himself. But Draco was too angry to give in. "You're so," he gasped, "So stupid, all you Gryffindors, you're so close-minded, and- and judgmental... once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater, that's it with you- you think all Slytherins are evil still, you just like me because you think I'm *hot*-"

"Get over yourself," Harry snapped. He rolled them back over, sucking so hard at Draco's neck, Draco's back arched, a heat sparking through his lower body that made his heart beat double time. "You're the one who... who..." He seemed to run out of steam, and just dedicated himself to biting at Draco's collarbone like he had unfortunately learned made Draco melt into a puddle beneath him, dragging his teeth and making Draco whimper needily.

It felt so good it brought tears to Draco's eyes, actual fucking tears, his hands going up to Harry's messy dark hair and knotting, pulling Harry's face against his neck so he wouldn't

stop moving his teeth against it. "You... Harry, your *mouth*, feels so *good*, I can't *stand* you-"

Harry let out a sharp bark of laughter, face turning up with his green eyes flashing. "Feeling's mutual," he snapped. Draco arched an eyebrow, only for Harry to wilt. "Okay, fine, it's *not,* Draco, I'm sorry, I just wish you would care about me half as much as you do about your godfather-"

"Are you actually still on about that?" Draco cried disbelievingly, pushing Harry's head back. "How many times do I have to tell you, I've never had a crush on him-"

"I don't mean like that!" Harry protested, raking a hand through his messed-up hair. "I just mean- you get so passionate defending him! You love him so much- not romantically, but he's so important to you- I just wish *I* was half that important to you-"

"You don't think you're important to me?" Draco said despairingly. "Just when I didn't think you could get any dumber-" He tightened his hands in Harry's hair, and pulled him into a hard, closed-mouth kiss before he let him go, foreheads falling together, fixed entirely on each other.

"Tell me, then," Harry breathed. "You never say anything, Draco. *Anything*."

"I..." Draco licked his lips nervously, and Harry snuck a kiss, soft and then hard again, groaning into it as the weight of Harry fully collapsed atop him, making him think things he had resolved he never would, things he could never let himself be the one to initiate. "Harry, what do you want me to say?"

"Just..." Harry ran his fingers through Draco's hair, stroking it by feel with their faces this close. "Just try and *act* like you like me half as much as I like you. Just *pretend* once in a while..."

Draco snorted. "Idiot! Just because I'm better at not showing how I feel all the time than Harry Potter, human distress signal-"

"What?" Harry's fingers stroked up Draco's side, over his shirt, and made his body tense. He wanted to rub up against Harry, get every inch of contact he could. It felt like himself he was tormenting, by not moving their bodies together. "*Do* you even like me?" Harry breathed.

"I can't believe you have to ask that-"

"That's not an answer-"

"Yes!" Draco gasped, and clutched at Harry's face, pressing a series of hard kisses to his lips between his trembling words. "Yes, I like you, you selfish prick- don't make me say it, *you're* the one who's going to get tired of me. *You'll* just move on to some Gryffindor eventually, someone who's actually good enough for you, *I'm* the one who's going to be left out in the cold-"

"No," Harry breathed. "That's not true. I couldn't." He kissed Draco harder, letting Draco wind his arms around his neck, no space between them at all anymore, nobody else alive, for

all the rest of the world mattered. "Of course you're good enough- I can never get *enough* of you-"

"You want to *fuck* me is what you mean," Draco hissed, "And once you do, when you get what you want, you'll move on to something better. That's what people *do*, they use you and then they move on. This is temporary, so don't make me humiliate myself over you, acting like we're in *love,* when sooner or later, you're just going to come to your senses and throw me away-"

"Never," Harry gasped, "Never," and kissed him so hard and so long Draco did feel like he was going to stop breathing. He only broke off when he had to, and then it was shallower kisses between gasps, with Harry panting *Never* between each kiss. "Never, never ever, Draco, I *love* you..."

Then they stopped talking, nothing but lips and wandering hands, making out like there was no tomorrow until with a call of "Sanguirenere!" the door to their room opened, and Sirius, Remus, and Severus all rushed inside.

"LEVICORPUS!" Severus bellowed, and Harry was lifted off Draco and thrown into the air.

"Draco!" Remus exclaimed worriedly, running over in a panic. "Draco, are you alright- oh. You weren't, ah, you weren't fighting..."

"Let him go, Snape!" Sirius snapped. "Liberacorpus!" Harry fell to the ground. Sirius pulled him up, brushing him off, while Draco pulled himself to sit up. He covered his stinging swollen lips, as if there was any chance of hiding what they had been up to now.

"Uh," Harry said, looking up at Sirius like a deer in the headlights. "I can, er, explain..."

"Your glasses, Harry," Remus said, walking over to get them from the table. That had the incidental effect of putting an additional body between Severus's wand and Harry, should Severus attempt to immediately take drastic action in defense of his godson.

"I knew it," Severus groaned, pocketing his wand and staring fixedly at the empty wall in extreme dislike. His hands were clenched to fists in a visible effort of self-repression. "I knew *something* had changed with you, Draco. You were so *happy*."

"So," Remus said gently. "This... is this new?"

"Downstairs!" Severus barked. "Both of you! Now! Not a word!"

"You don't need to go all professor on them," Sirius complained, but took Harry's shoulder and marched him down the stairs all the same. And then the three adults, who had apparently worked out their grievances enough that none of them were *visibly* missing any limbs, sat them down in the living room. They stood over them like an Inquisitorial Squad of their own, a united front of a sort against the teenage debauchery they had stumbled into.

"We didn't mean to intrude, boys," Remus said, voice placating. "We tried to call you back to finish dinner, and when you didn't answer, we were worried you'd Apparated somewhere

again."

"If only," Severus sighed. When Sirius glared at him for it, he glared defiantly right back.

"So this is new?" Remus asked, and Draco shrugged uncomfortably.

"How long has this been going on?" Severus demanded more bluntly.

"It's hard to say, sir," Harry said stubbornly, and met Severus's glare just as defiantly as Sirius had. The godfather-godson resemblance was starting to come through.

"December? January?" Draco offered weakly. "It's not a big deal..."

"Yes it is!" Harry protested, grabbing Draco's hand, and Draco wished that Grimmauld had some special debilitating House Black gaping maw curse, which would cause the old house elf heads to sneak down chomping to swallow up residents down into the floorboards beneath.

"So are you... dating? Boyfriends?" Remus prompted, and Draco looked away. "Draco, Harry, I know this must feel intrusive, but we're having you stay here together, and we all care deeply about both of you." A glare from Severus made him hastily correct, "Sirius. Sirius and I care deeply about both of you. We just want to be sure that-"

"You aren't surprised?" Harry asked softly. Sirius grinned knowingly, looking like he wanted to give Harry a high five sooner than do anything more paternal. "I mean, I've been open about being bisexual... and I've talked to Sirius about Draco..."

Sirius smirked. "And I was remiss not to teach you any spells you might need. Let's see, you should take notes... protection, lubrication... preparation, numbing..."

"You will teach them no such things!" Severus protested. "This cannot possibly-"

"Severus," Draco interrupted, frowning. "Didn't you tell me that the decision was mine? That if Harry was what I truly... that you wouldn't stand in my way?"

"Did I?" Severus said, and shuddered. "That was obviously before I had to witness the *reality* of this atrocity. You, *Potter*- if you ever lay hands on my godson again-"

"You talked to Snape about us?" Harry said, face lighting up in an inappropriately huge smile, and Draco put his head in his hands.

"Don't threaten him!" Sirius yelled, getting between them. "If you know these boys at all, I'd bet my life this was *Draco's* idea!" He looked back at them sheepishly. "Er, no offense, Draco. I don't think there's anything wrong with it if you both like each other, and you're careful... Remus and I started up years earlier than you two. Your father was so jealous. He still couldn't get your mother to give him the time of day for years, you're well ahead of him there..."

"Sirius, don't tell them that," Remus groaned. The mention of Lily Potter naturally just made Severus look more likely to test how many people he could hit with one Sectumsempra curse.

Draco was torn between the urge to intervene, and the urge to take shelter behind some large item of furniture. "Boys, neither of you are of age. You should not follow our example. I don't think it would be a good idea for you to be *fully* intimate before you're at least sixteen, that's the legal age in Britain- and really, even if you *were* of age, I don't think it's a good idea to have any full intimacy without a clearly defined relationship, and knowing that you're in love-"

"*Never*," Severus snapped. "There will *never* be intimacy between my godson and a *Potter*-"

"Okay, yeah, you should probably wait longer than we did, Harry," Sirius said cheerfully, "We spent a lot of time messing around not knowing what we were doing- pair of idiots, really, lucky Remus did research- I'll give you a sheet with some spells written down later-"

"Sooner than allow the Potter boy to deflower my godson, I will geld him myself!"

Draco started to laugh hysterically, while Harry looked abruptly more worried. "Um, is that a figure of speech, sir, or..."

"No, Mr. Potter," Severus intoned. "It is not a *figure of speech*!"

"You're such a homophobe, Snivellus," Sirius laughed. "Self-hating homophobe, perhaps-"

"I knew and accepted Draco as gay years before you ever *met* him, you ignorant piece of gutter filth!" Severus snarled. "When he cursed a boy for outing him, *I* protected him from the consequences. Never presume to think you understand our relationship- to think you understand *Draco*! I would happily allow him to date a boy who was anywhere *close* to worthy of him-"

"Careful, Severus," Remus said, no hint of a smile on his face. "Careful."

"I know I'm not good enough for Draco," Harry said earnestly, face setting in determination. "Sir. Even if he says it's the other way around. I know how incredible Draco is, believe me, and I know- I know you two are a package deal, sir, and how much your opinion means to him. And I know you'll never like me, but I just want you to know, I care a great deal for Draco, and I would never hurt him-"

"Harry, you don't need to justify yourself," Sirius snapped. "This is ridiculous. Harry is a good person. So is Draco. They've both been through a lot, Snape, and if this makes them happy..."

"You think they are like the two of you?" Severus snorted. "Please. My godson does not have Lupin's *disadvantages* in life. Perhaps I am not so eager to let him *settle* for someone so far below his level of intellect and class as Lupin was-"

"Sirius!" Remus cried out, pulling Sirius back before his attempt to hit Severus could connect. He swung at the open air instead, and tried again before Remus grabbed both his hands and held him there. "Sirius, *don't*! This isn't about us- of *course* it's different, Severus. They're not like us- and they're not like James and Lily, if that's what you're thinking-"

"Forgive me," Severus said chillingly, "If I am not overly keen to watch another promising, talented young person toss their pearls before swine, and throw away their life for a *Potter*-"

"Harry!" Remus cried, and pulled Harry back from Severus as he started for him too. Draco pushed himself in the way, grabbing at Severus's hands.

"Severus, take it back," Draco said intently. "Please take it back. He's *not* James Potter-"

"Sit down, Severus," Remus said, guiding him into a chair in the living room. "Sit down and we can talk about this like responsible adults. All of us. And no more talk of Harry's parents, please. No more talk of the past. Just the present. Harry and Draco, *they* are our future. And we will try to protect them, to stop them from repeating our old mistakes- *all* of us made mistakes, and they can learn from us if we let them, learn so they do not *suffer* as we did. Please, Severus..."

Slowly, grudgingly, Severus nodded and sat down with them.

Futureless

Chapter Notes

Playlist

"So what you're saying," Hermione said slowly, "Is that this is our chance."

Draco and Luna both looked at her like she was mad. "They might attack Sirius and Remus's wedding. How is that *our* chance?"

"So they mean for it to be a trap," Hermione said logically, "But if we know they're coming, doesn't that make it them the ones who are walking into a trap? Now we know somewhere Bellatrix Lestrange is likely to be. Even if she expects us to know she's coming, we can be ready..."

"If she shows up," Draco said warily, "She won't be alone. Aunt Bella-"

"What about Bellatrix Lestrange?" a voice asked from the door of Hagrid's hut, but it wasn't Hagrid. It was Neville.

"Oh, hey," Draco said, trying and failing to force a smile. "We're just thinking about the mechanics of formal enmity- no, Neville, you don't have to- give that paper back-"

"The End Times of Bellatrix Lestrange," Neville read aloud. "Luna, this is in your handwriting!" Luna nodded proudly, while Draco and Hermione exchanged looks of despair. "A Collaborative Project by the Rat Thieves. Goal: Murder. Target: Bellatrix Black Lestrange. You... oh, Luna, is this in case she comes after Draco? Or are you planning to hunt her down and attack her yourselves?" Neville didn't miss a beat before blurting, "If you do, I want in. You know what she did to my parents! And they'll never be really safe while she's still out there alive-"

"Neville," Draco said with a sigh, "You're about as far away from a killer as a person can get." He didn't think giant evil snakes counted.

"And they aren't?" Neville asked, gesturing to Hermione and Luna, before stepping up eagerly. "You're not denying it, are you?"

Luna touched Draco on the arm, giving him a pleading look. "We'll need to give everyone some kind of warning eventually," she said, and Draco sighed and finally nodded, sinking back in his chair, while Hermione murmured in his ear what a terrible idea it was, letting this start to spread around. "Neville, have you heard that my Uncle Sirius and Uncle Remus are getting married on the summer solstice? Are you planning to go to their wedding?"

"Are..." Neville breathed, seeming to lose any memory of what their conversation had previously been about. "Are you planning to go to the wedding too, Luna? Are you asking if... if you want you and I to go together? Like a date-"

"No, like an ambush!" Luna said happily. "We think our aunt is coming to kill Draco and probably Harry, maybe also your parents, oh, and definitely Uncle Sirius, Dumbledore if he's there, it's really an exciting assemblage from a Death Eater perspective- and so we're planning a counter-ambush. A counter-trap! Isn't it exciting?"

"Oh, yeah," Neville said glumly, who'd somehow managed to falsely convince himself once again that Luna was asking him out, since Merlin knew, after his failure with the Yule Ball, he'd never have the nerve to try again himself. "Yeah. Very exciting." Then he seemed to process what she was saying. "Wait. We're going to use their wedding as a *trap*?"

"We have intelligence," Draco explained, "That if they can find the location, they'll attack en masse, but defense of the wedding as a whole is something Dumbledore's concerned about. Maybe it should be canceled, but if it isn't, we're narrowing our focus. *We* just have one goal, us three."

"Keep everyone alive?" Neville guessed, voice quivering.

Hermione crossed her arms. "Of course, that goes without *saying*, but the point is, we don't see ourselves as the prey here. We want to turn this situation around to our advantage. And when they arrive, it will be *our* goal to take out Bellatrix Lestrange once and for all, before she can hurt Draco or Harry. Or your parents. Again. Is that the kind of thing that would interest you?"

"Oh, *yes*," Neville said, "I'm totally joining if you'll let me in," and it didn't even seem like all of his enthusiasm was just from having Luna there as part of the project.

"Well," Hermione said stiffly, "Wonderful. Now do you have any contribution to add?"

Neville considered. "Do you have any questions about plants?"

CAREERS ADVICE

All fifth-years are required to attend a short meeting with their Head of House during the first week of the summer term to discuss their future careers. Times of individual appointments are listed below.

"Hey, Draco, you're with McGonagall," Millie called, looking over from the notice with a laugh. "Have they *officially* switched you to Gryffindor? Could they at least wait till we play Hufflepuff?"

Draco marched over, incredulous, and sure enough, he alone had a notation next to his name that marked he would be going to McGonagall's office.

"We had a fight over break," Draco muttered. "Severus must just be mad about it. I'll get it changed before I actually have to go."

But when he cornered Severus before breakfast, he found Severus far more reasonable than he would have hoped. "Headmaster Dumbledore," Severus said coolly, "Has indicated that as your godfather, I cannot be expected to have the necessary distance as regards the subject of your future, that one would hope for as your teacher. Minerva is more than capable of advising you."

"You don't agree with that, do you?" Draco whined. Severus shook him off and stalked away. "Is this for what happened during break?" he called after him. "Are you punishing me?"

Severus whirled, coming back to hiss in a low voice, "Hardly, Draco. I happen to agree with Albus, given that you successfully convinced me your life's dream was to become an Unspeakable, for three entire years before you told me it was a lie. I am not well-qualified to see through your *pretensions*. Given the chance, Minerva may prove more successful."

So Draco was stuck skulking up to McGonagall's office after Ancient Runes, saying goodbye to his mocking fellow Slytherins and acting the Gryffindor after all. From what Neville whispered to him, passing him on his way in, Umbridge had been there to sit in on McGonagall's meeting with Harry before Neville, and there had been an almighty row before Neville could get in, that had been audible all the way down the hall. But McGonagall seemed more than crisp and composed enough to be imposing nonetheless. Draco perched politely on the chair before her desk, very much wishing he had never admitted he was lying about wanting to be an Unspeakable.

At least Umbridge wasn't still in attendance. Draco was already on edge enough for this meeting, without the ever-present and growing temptation to use Cauterizo on her again. But there were certainly a great number of pamphlets on McGonagall's desk, too many for comfort. "So, Mr. Malfoy," McGonagall began. "I know you must have been expecting to have this meeting with your Head of House, as your classmates are, but given that Professor Snape is your godfather, I have taken his place. I hope you will feel you can be just as open with me."

"Of course, Professor McGonagall," Draco said, forcing a smile. "Well, Professor Snape has already told me all about the NEWTs requirements for becoming an Unspeakable, so..."

"Professor Snape has already told *me,*" McGonagall interjected sharply, "That you confessed to him some time ago that your public ambition to become an Unspeakable was a completely fabricated one."

Draco's smile froze on his face, and then slowly fell away. "Oh. Yes. We did have that conversation."

"I do recall a lively conversation we had about the mechanics of time travel in your first year. Has your interest in becoming an Unspeakable cooled since then?"

"I wanted to be an Unspeakable once," Draco said honestly, because he had. In the blue line, not even the blue loop, when he'd been only ten. It had been a phase, and he'd grown out of it,

because his father had made him. It didn't seem like that had been the same person as the one who lived in his head now. "I guess I just... I don't know, I lost interest in it."

"Well, that is what we are here to discuss, Mr. Malfoy," she said brusquely, leaning forward with her gaze alert behind her spectacles. "Your career options upon graduation from Hogwarts. Have you any other ambitions for your future, if becoming an Unspeakable is no longer your goal?"

Draco really couldn't stand the idea of being an Unspeakable. The thought of willingly taking on more secrecy after so many years of it felt claustrophobic. "Yeah, I don't want to be an Unspeakable, but... I don't know what else."

"Materials have been distributed, describing a number of careers with the Ministry and otherwise," McGonagall prompted. "Have you read them?" Draco nodded. "Did anything catch your interest?"

"No," Draco said, staring down at his hands. He already regretted letting Luna paint his nails yesterday. The black hue looked the dark rusty color of dried blood in the light from McGonagall's tower window.

McGonagall let out a discontented sigh, already seeming to sense something wrong. Draco thought back to this meeting with Severus in the blue loop with a wry, mirthless smile. He and Severus had chatted with perfect civility about the many options given Draco's aptitude in Potions, as well as with people, and Severus had gently urged him away from thinking professional Quidditch could be an option. He had been so young back then.

"I am sure you are aware that as a high achiever academically, many avenues will be open to you upon graduation. Am I correct in hearing that you intend to take all twelve OWLs?"

"Yes," Draco mumbled, shifting uneasily in his seat.

"Why have you decided to take them all?"

"Keeps me busy. Makes Hermione happy," Draco muttered, which did not look an answer she'd been expecting.

"Professor Snape thinks you capable of achieving a high number of Os on your NEWTs," she persisted. "Even perhaps *all* Os. Your work in my class is consistently at an O level, on both written and practical work, and Professor Snape attests the same. Professor Flitwick calls you one of the most talented Charms students he has ever had the pleasure to teach. And while your Defense marks have slipped this year, you are usually a stellar student in Defense as well. Professor Lupin consistently graded you at 'Outstanding', save for some difficulty with Boggarts."

Nothing she said drew a response.

"You have undertaken multiple years of independent Potions study with Professor Snape, and he informs me you are already capable of brewing the Wolfsbane potion. Something of a prodigy, Mr. Malfoy. Have you considered a future in brewing? Here are some pamphlets

regarding options for independent potion-makers, as well as contractors... and brewers for the Ministry..."

Draco took them mechanically, and something she saw in his eyes seemed to scare her. "Mr. Malfoy," she said gently, "You seem to be showing little interest in this discussion."

Draco shrugged. "I'm sorry, Professor. I don't mean to make you waste your time."

"Why," McGonagall said, voice gone troubled, "Would I be wasting my time in this?"

Draco exhaled discontentedly, staring down at his nails again. He tried picking at them to chip them, but they were enchanted to last far longer than that. "I mean, it's not like any of it matters, right?"

"Why would it not matter?"

"There's a war coming, Professor," Draco said, trying to keep the temper out of his voice. "I'll be fighting for the Order of the Phoenix, just like you. I'll kill Aunt Bella, or she'll kill me. That's my future, if you can call that one. I don't need any pamphlets to know that. What's the point of thinking past the war?"

"There *will* be life after war," McGonagall said with unwarranted confidence. "Yes, Mr. Malfoy, war is coming. Hopefully, it will not involve students, or last long enough that you need be involved directly. But even in a worst case scenario... do you not believe this is a war our side can win? Is that the cause for your lack of hopefulness about the future?"

"No," Draco said sharply, lips twisting in a strange and bitter smile now. "No, *you'll* win the war. I'm sure of it."

McGonagall exhaled, and took the pamphlets off her desk, putting them aside in a drawer. "Mr. Malfoy, do you not expect to personally survive the war?"

Draco felt a lump in his throat. "Why do we even have to talk about this?" he muttered.

"Draco," McGonagall said firmly, her use of his first name pronounced enough to make him start. "As Professor Flitwick says, you are one of the most talented students we have ever taught-"

"Stolen," Draco hissed without thinking, "Stolen power," hand tightening around his wand in his pocket. He grinned wider at her confused look. "It's just my wand, Professor. That's what makes me seem so special. I just have a wand with more power than anyone else."

"I have seen your work transfiguring jewelry. It was not just your wand to make those beautiful rings for your uncle. Nor is your wand what gives you your intelligence, your creativity, or your dueling ability. A wand is only as good as the wizard that wields it-"

"Yeah, exactly," Draco said tightly, biting his tongue hard. McGonagall folded her hands before herself, her air growing more grave and cautious.

"Draco," she said slowly. "I should not have to tell you how talented you are. A wizard of your skills could do a great deal of good in the world. You have showed great leadership skill this year as Slytherin Quidditch captain. The team is unrecognizable from last year. And with integrating young women into the Slytherin team for the first time, you showed great vision and courage. With these qualities, you would have the skills to make a very fine Auror-"

Draco couldn't help it. He burst out laughing, and found himself unable to stop. "An Auror?" he cackled. "You're joking! An *Auror*!"

"I am quite in earnest," she said severely. "Yes, there may be concerns with temperament-"

"I don't have the temperament to be an Auror," Draco scoffed, wiping some wetness from his eyes, he was laughing so hard. "I don't have the temperament to be anything except-" *Except a Death Eater.* "I have the temperament of *Bellatrix Lestrange*, Professor McGonagall. *You* taught her. If you had been her Head of House, how would you have advised *her* on her career prospects?"

"You seem to hold a very poor opinion of yourself," McGonagall observed. The more upset he got, the calmer it seemed to make her draw herself in turn. "In my experience, I can say I find it an unjustifiably poor one."

"You know what I did, right?" Draco snorted. "I mean, what I really did? In that graveyard?"

McGonagall's lips tightened, though more understanding seemed to come on her face. "One would be remiss to expect you to simply forget the events of that night. Even if they have been successfully hidden from public knowledge. But do you believe that what you did means you no longer deserve success and happiness in your future?"

"I don't *have* a future," Draco blurted without meaning to, and then fell deathly silent. When he looked down, the small dark red moons of his nails were trembling in the air, hands vibrating with a fuzziness spreading through. He reached into his pocket and took his calming draught and draught of peace in one go each. He didn't scruple to hide it from her.

"Draco, if this discussion is becoming too upsetting for you, we can take a break or reschedule to finish-"

"There's no discussion to have!" Draco laughed, throwing up his hands. She jerked back when the gesture made the empty vials fall to the floor and smash. "Sorry, sorry! Evanesco. Tergeo. Sorry, Professor, I didn't mean to mess up your office. It's fine, see? Totally fine. You're just really wasting your time here. Would you give career advice to a forest fire?"

"Calm down," she ordered, and Draco felt tears begin to run down his face anyway.

"I don't have a future, okay?" he gasped. "I'm just... just waiting for all this to play out. Trying to take down the people who need taking down... trying to keep the people I care about from being taken down too. I want to keep *them* alive through the war. Whether *I* make it out, that doesn't matter. It's probably better for everyone involved if I don't-"

"Draco," she said sharply. "You must *not* speak of yourself this way. In your time at Hogwarts, I have seen you acquire a reputation for yourself as a dark wizard. You have suffered a great deal of unjust judgment, and not just being falsely suspected as the Heir of Slytherin. Some of it you seemed to encourage, perhaps to protect yourself, but you have not deserved the way many have painted you over the years. I know that I myself have been guilty at times of judging you by the facade you put up, and I apologize for that.

"But you are no Bellatrix Lestrange, I promise you, nor have I ever thought you *that*. I knew that woman when she was your age, and you have so much less in common with her than you ever might think. Blood, a wand, and power. Those are the three things. The *only* three. And if you did not survive the war, the wizarding world as well as your friends would be much the worse for it. Draco, how would your cousin Luna, for one, feel to hear you speak this way about yourself-"

"Listen," Draco said wearily, wiping at his face. "I appreciate it, Professor, but there's no help for it. People are who they are. There's only so much anyone else can change that. That *they* can change it. So- so it's not your fault if I'm futureless. Just... just tell Severus we talked about me doing curse-breaking or something." He got to his feet, heading for the door.

"Draco," she called after him, "Mr. Malfoy. Take some time to recover your composure. Look at the career materials. *Think*. And I will be happy to meet with you again anytime to finish our discussion."

Watching the Weasley twins make their grand exit from Hogwarts was different this time around, to say the least. It was bittersweet, to the extent that it seemed to mark one step closer in Fred's life towards the death that only Draco knew might await him. But Draco was no member of the Inquisitorial Squad this time. That left him free to stand and cheer their departure with most of the rest of the school. Even better, it gave him no obligation to clean up after their messes, whether swamps or fireworks that all the professors down to even Severus left alone, drolly sending over and over for Umbridge to come clear out of the dungeons for him.

And Draco knew the twins this time, though perhaps that was a misnomer. He had spent a great deal more *time* with the twins, and he was fond of them despite himself, and not just because they were fit and funny and magnetic, but because they were good-hearted people, who were such a big part of Ron's life. But he couldn't say he *knew* them, past their surface of glittering ever-happiness. Still, it was a compelling surface, brilliant as the fireworks that kept whizzing and banging for weeks after they were gone. It made the increased dreariness in the castle left by their absence a bit less pronounced, at least. And helped him keep to his resolution not to think about his talk with McGonagall, or the prospects of his future, at all whatsoever. If Severus wasn't going to bring it up, he wasn't. He could pretend to be happy, and sometimes, he even felt he was.

A real light dimmed from the castle walls was the belated aftermath of Dumbledore's Army disappearing. Draco didn't have to worry about being persecuted by any of the Inquisitorial Squad, but it was a surprising gap in his life, not being able to watch Harry earnestly teach defensive spells once or twice a week. He missed it, although not half as much as he missed

when the Room of Requirement had been intact for them to sneak off to together. They ended up having their Occlumency lessons each week in Severus's chambers instead, about the least aphrodisiacal setting on the planet, although that didn't stop Harry from attempting to get handsy a few times.

When Fred and George opened Weasley's Wizard Wheezes, it finally clued Ron, Hermione, Luna, and Neville in to their source of the finances: Harry's Triwizard winnings. They were not as indignant as one might have thought, to find out Draco had known a secret they hadn't. Even Ron who was usually ready to be jealous over a slight breeze or speck of dust. "Of course Draco knows," Luna said brightly. "You tell someone everything when you're in love."

Neville, who had been just yesterday complaining to Draco of how little he could get Luna to talk about herself, looked glum at this, while Hermione looked smug, Ron wiggled his eyebrows suggestively, and Harry turned so red his neck began to blend in with his Gryffindor tie. "Or," Draco said archly, "It's that I've been giving him Occlumency lessons, and I've literally been inside his head once a week for months. He couldn't keep any secrets from me if he wanted to."

"What do you think, Ron, does Harry still have any secrets from Draco?" Luna asked.

Ron considered, lowering his voice, before making an observation that earned him a whack from Hermione, and a groan of unspeakable mortification from Harry. "I don't know. Do you think Draco knows how often Harry goes off to lock himself in the dorm bathroom for a suspicious length of time at night? Especially on days we've had Potions with you," he added helpfully, and Hermione whacked Ron once more, which he looked to be quite pleased by.

"Why are we friends?" Harry whined, burying his face in his hands.

Draco pushed his arms aside to poke at his scar. "Is this true, Harry?" he purred. "Do the other Gryffindors suffer from the consequences of your insatiable erotic appetite?"

"Well, he does hog the bathroom quite a lot," Neville said thoughtfully.

Draco was also kept quite busy dealing with his nearly sixteen-year-old hormones, and the state of near-constant frustration that stolen kisses but not nearly enough had him in from Harry. But he had OWL preparation and most of all Quidditch practice to keep him too busy for *that* sometimes, as little as Harry liked how much time that meant Draco spending with Theo. He could assure Harry until he was blue in the face that he would never replace him with Theo, it didn't change how jealous Harry was, knowing that Theo had at least a small thing for Draco. Sometimes he caught Harry sneaking around daytime Slytherin practices, watching them, although that might not just be jealousy. He'd always seemed to like following Draco around and watching him.

They practiced every day, the week before the Hufflepuff-Slytherin match. They all knew well what was at stake, but Dobby reminded them on a daily basis, with Wooky and Nissy solemnly holding up before each practice the calligraphy displays of points and different aggregate permutations the elves had made between the four houses. This would be Hufflepuff's last game, and after losing both their matches, they were already out of it.

Ravenclaw had a win and a loss, but Slytherin's decimation of them had them too far in the negative to ever catch up... or at least, catch up to Gryffindor.

After two games each, Gryffindor had an aggregate of 210, and Slytherin had one of 170, with Ravenclaw at -130. The advantage was Gryffindor's from playing their match later, and knowing the score they'd need to win by to get the Cup. That had arguably been what gave them the victory in third year. But the only solution for Slytherin, then, was just to run up the score against Hufflepuff so much, Gryffindor could know the deficit but find it too steep a hill to climb.

Time to start steepening that hill.

As Draco stepped forward to shake hands that fateful matchday with the Hufflepuff captain, sixth-year Herbert Fleet, he made sure to give him his most disconcertingly pretty smile. The tall, reedy, auburn-haired boy was trying and failing to face up to him with some modicum of toughness. But the only member of the Hufflepuff team who looked at all sanguine about their prospects was former Seeker Cedric Diggory in the stands. Fleet, who had the misfortune to be the Keeper, looked about as enthusiastic at the prospect of the match as Neville was about his impending Potions OWL.

"You know this is about to be the worst day of your life, right?" Draco said softly, giving Fleet a heavy-lidded stare through his eyelashes, much like Aunt Bella had used to give her prey. Fleet looked like if he didn't piss himself right then and there, it would be a near thing.

"Shake hands," Madam Hooch ordered, and Fleet's hand actually shook in Draco's.

"I'm trying to be kind, advising you of what's to come," Draco whispered. "You *will* need to see a Mind Healer after this. Really, you ought to have brought one on standby..."

Fleet made an incoherent noise rather like a Muggle car-horn, wrenching back and dropping Draco's hand like it had burned him. "Now, now, young man," Hooch admonished Fleet, "Try and show some sportsmanship. Brooms at the ready! On my whistle. Three... two... one..."

And so the badger hunt began.

Hufflepuff actually had fewer girls on their team than Slytherin, with their Chaser McAvoy the only one about, but between Vince, Greg, and Millie, Slytherin still managed to visibly be the larger team as they all soared up into the May sunlight. It was almost an out-of-body experience, how beautiful that Slytherin green looked on the emerald robes of Draco's team, as the Quaffle was let loose and Astoria, the youngest player in the air, was predictably the fastest to it. He swooped up higher, keeping one eye out for the gold of the Snitch and another eye cautiously on the rusty gold hair of the Hufflepuff Seeker Summerby, who'd somehow beaten him to the Snitch the first go around, when Hufflepuff Beater McManus had nailed him smack in the jaw just before a sighting. Just the memory of that day in the blue loop made the sight of Summerby a maddening one, making Draco long to waste time leading him in some wild feint liable to cause bloody injury.

It had only been a narrow loss, but it had meant somehow losing the cup the year Umbridge had done everything in her power to make it happen for them, banning the Weasley twins and Potter for the final two games. Gryffindor had been in fine form instead, as the fisticuffs that ensued after Gryffindor-Slytherin in the red line had been done more privately, and so Slytherin had to raise the bar to have any shot at changing things. But for the first time, he wasn't just playing to win, or more honestly, to beat Harry Potter. The Kingsnakes had been an experiment, a piece of either bravery or foolishness of Draco's own making, and it would be their performance on the pitch today, not whether they won but how much they won by, which would determine if they won the Cup. And thus, fairly or not, in many eyes whether that experiment had been a success or failure.

Nothing succeeds like success, Draco had told the fifth-year boys, as he was convincing them to come back to a team with girls on it. It echoed in his own ears as he watched his players launch into the plan exactly as they'd told him: *They'll be expecting some complicated play from us, so don't bother. Astoria, get it, fly like hell, and I'll put Fleet off his game at the handshake, he won't be ready for you. Throw one in before a minute's passed, before* half *a minute, and we'll knock them out of the sky and they'll never really get back up in it again.*

"Greengrass is attacking the Hufflepuff hoops alone- both teams racing to try and catch up to her- Fleet isn't even in the hoops properly yet, he's floundering- she shoots for the top hoop! Greengrass scores! It's 10-nil to Slytherin off a fast break right off the off! And it couldn't have been a prettier, more terrifying little lady to draw first blood! Hufflepuff takes the Quaffle back at the restart- Summerby's *body* intercepts Smith's pass to Cadwallader- looks like following Malfoy isn't the best strategy if he can't stay out of his teammate's way- Nott picks up the Quaffle!"

"BLITZKRIEG!" Millie yelled, courtesy of Draco cramming in Muggle Studies. And all of Slytherin scattered and then flew at breakneck pace towards Hufflepuff, save Draco who was not allowing himself to watch the action at all after the first points. Draco had laid out a plan for them to go full throttle early on, and rack up at least a forty-point gap before Hufflepuff knew what hit them, on the rationale of both psychological warfare as well as the need to ensure Draco wouldn't catch the Snitch too soon.

All of this fell apart if Draco couldn't catch the Snitch before his Kingsnakes tired too much, or, God forbid, if Draco didn't catch it at all. If he didn't, there would never be enough points to overpower the inevitable win and Snitch catch of Harry against Ravenclaw. He was working on those assumptions, not from the blue loop- Harry hadn't played in that game- but common sense. And right away, his tactics worked the way he had envisioned. Hufflepuff were folding like a house of cards, as Fleet let in the next two shots, including one Theo threw almost right at him, deflecting off his foot and into the bottom right hoop.

"And it's a deflection- and it's into the goalhoop! That's 30-nil to Slytherin! Could we be about to witness another massacre the likes of- what's that? Has Malfoy spotted the Snitch? He's diving low, he's cut in front of Summerby- Summerby in hot pursuit- and Malfoy's flown across the path of Summerby! Summerby draws back- the Snitch escapes- Malfoy blocks his path again- Malfoy is stalling the Snitch catch! He's stalling to run up the scoreboard against Hufflepuff- and here comes Parkinson! Parkinson surrounded by the Slytherin Beaters- big ugly lugs they are, no getting through that honor guard- Fleet saves-

oh, but he's only batted it away, Parkinson's got the rebound- oh, and it smacks in right off the goalhoop! They heard that ring in all the way in Hogsmeade! 40-nil to Slytherin already! Fred, George, mate, you're lucky you've left this hellhole, it's only getting worse from here!"

Draco was panting after his successful play to block the Snitch rather than catch it. He still had a vague idea where the Snitch was, with one eye on the haze of gold near the sun where he thought it had flitted off to, and another on the chastened, circling form below him of Summerby. He couldn't afford to focus on the match below, not even when Hufflepuff got two back, as their Beaters took out Pansy and then Theo near the goalhoops and pounced on the turnovers. "New plan!" Millie yelled, after another turnover almost went in. Hufflepuff stands reverberated with excitement, at their probably illusive hope of a comeback, though they groaned when Millie made a fingertip save, snatching it right off the hoop before it went in. "Astoria, Arco Iris!"

Astoria jetted out in front of the pack, and Millie loosed her fearsome long throw to soar it in an arch of light overhead past everyone, where a waiting Astoria would have been offside in football, but there was no such thing in Quidditch- and it hit a circling Summerby, the Quaffle bouncing off his confused face and down into the hands of McAvoy. Theo intercepted her throw to Smith- and Draco was watching the match instead of for the Snitch again, though in all fairness, watching Summerby get hit in the face was almost as satisfying as watching Vince and Greg follow his plan to shoot Bludgers exclusively at Zacharias Smith. Because Smith was the greatest scoring threat, not just because he was irritating, although that was a bonus, and he certainly wasn't racking up any points with Vince and Greg trailing him and whacking at him like he'd killed their mothers. Which Lee Jordan kept highlighting, with increasing glee, as a major feature of his commentary.

Draco ignored the pitch then, trying even to tune out Lee Jordan below, although he couldn't help but pump his fist each time he heard the score rise, going up only in Slytherin's favor now. He wished he could watch the interlocking, pre-arranged set of attacking plays between the Chasers, something between football Tiki-Taka and a three-way magical duel, which he'd been told were a thing of rare beauty. But he was man-marking Summerby now, and for good reason. He'd had to block off the Snitch yet another time, and that time he had simply played interference entirely, keeping Summerby from flying anywhere much at all in a whirling ring of pain around him, the one-man Protego Diabolica. He could see the boy was getting worn-down mentally, but once the score hit 100-20, he began to fear Slytherin would be wearing down just as much physically. He knew the proverbs, the fables, the tortoise and the hare... but if the hare could choose when the race ended...

"Nott has Smith on his trail- Smith flies in front to help block off the goalhoops- Parkinson available for the pass- Hufflepuff Beaters on the case, but Crabbe is here first, or is it Goyle- still can't tell them apart- either Crabbe or Goyle has knocked Smith out of Nott's way, and it's Nott's fifth of the afternoon! 110 to 20, Slytherin! Hufflepuff's going down easier than a- and Malfoy's diving! Has he seen the Snitch? Is this a feint? It must be, he's going straight to the hoops- the famous Malfoy hoop feint, right at the Hufflepuff goalkeeper- Summerby knows better than to fall for that-"

Except just as Draco had remembered, the Snitch today really did seem to like the Hufflepuff goal hoops. Summerby, the utter numbskull, seemed to have been so warned against Draco's

favorite feint, that he didn't make more than a half-hearted attempt to match Draco's pace once he set off towards Fleet. And Fleet didn't notice the glint of the Snitch in between his squinting face and the bronze of the leftmost hoop- he was just standing his ground, as if confident it was a feint as well, like Draco would surely pull out of the surging flight before he got anywhere near him.

He didn't. He collided full-on with Fleet, nearly knocking them both out of the sky, except they clanged into the hoops instead, Fleet's whole back rebounding with a clang against the bronze as he grabbed at them and his broom for dear life, no doubt left with bruises on his back for weeks. Draco collided into Fleet's body, providing the momentum that had driven back the Keeper, and the impact along with his lunge towards the Snitch sent him hurtling into a tailspin, struggling to get control of his broom. He was nauseous, nearly lightheaded from whirling before he came out of it right before he hit the ground, but he landed on his feet, letting his Firebolt land safely beside him, as he rolled up and screamed, "I'VE GOT THE SNITCH!"

The entire green stand before Draco erupted into hysterics, all the more when he threw the Snitch in the air to show them and caught it, taking it to his lips and kissing it with a flourish as Jordan declared, "And that's a wrap, folks- Slytherin win, 260 to *20*- have you ever seen the like, ladies and gentlemen? No one gave this new crop of fifth-years a chance in hell at the Cup, but now they're poised to have a real shot..."

The mental math was beyond Draco at that moment of hysterical wonder, but not Millie, who tackled him to the ground crushing him but making him laugh in disbelieving glee as she yelled, "FOUR HUNDRED AND TEN, GRINDELWALD!"

"That's what we've got?" Draco gasped. "That's what they'll have to beat?"

"They'll have to beat Ravenclaw by 200 to *tie* that!" Millie crowed, and Draco felt his heart sink slightly, thinking them very much capable of that, until she added, "NO WEASLEY TWINS! THEY DID A RUNNER! There goes the defense! And with that Weasley they've got *left* in the hoops? They'll never smash Ravenclaw that bad, *never*! We've won it, Draco, we've won-"

"Don't get ahead of yourself," Draco laughed, but clutched her tight to him as he felt the others land around them, finishing their victory lap. Astoria was crying from happiness, and none of the others looked far behind. Especially not Vince, who soon joined her, wailing at the top of his lungs. "Oh, fuck, Vince, get a hold of yourself, the whole school's watching-"

"I'VE NEVER BEEN SO HAPPY IN ALL MY LIFE-"

"Vince, Vince, you'll be happier when we win the cup," Theo laughed, hugging Vince around the shoulders and shaking him, and then gave Draco the broadest smile he had ever seen on Theo's face. When Theo leaned in to hug Draco again, though, he only gave it as long as necessary not to be rude, before throwing himself on Pansy instead. She looked a bit excited to be hugged by him, but not sizably more so than by Millie next. Draco didn't think Blaise had any reason to be jealous. He hoped Harry didn't, up there in the stands as well, except for the points total racked up. Draco was in no mood to deal with another jealous fit. He was going to party, and party *hard.*

Party they did, arriving in the Slytherin common room in their Kingsnakes hoodies without an ounce of shame this time, swaggering in like conquering heroes, while Blaise led the crowd in his Quidditch Princess chant.

Pansy, Pansy Parkinson! She's our Princess Parkinson!

Pansy, Pansy Parkinson! She's our Princess Parkinson!

Slytherin will always win, with our Princess Parkinson!

Her throw's the pride of Slytherin, she'll always put the Quaffle in,

Those other Chasers get the bin, for Quidditch Princess Parkinson!

Pansy, Pansy Parkinson...

And on it went, over and over. It was no 'Weasley is Our King', but Draco had to admit, he found himself belting out the short verse time after time with the rest before long.

The booze kept pouring, the music blaring, and the chants kept on coming, even the Draco Malfoy chant, which Luna had been trying to make catch on for years in Slytherin House. It only just seemed to catch on in time to blast into Severus's ears, when he showed up at 4 am threatening Unforgivables should they not all go to bed at once:

That Seeker is a dragon, he's burning up the pitch!

Malfoy is invincible, and he'll make you his bitch!

Ravenclaw is Malfoy's bitch! Hufflepuff is Malfoy's bitch!

And when it's time for Gryffindor, they get the dragon dick!

They get the dragon dick, oh yeah, they get the dragon dick

Malfoy is invincible! You'll get the dragon dick!

Draco found himself humming it over and over the next day, even in the library, no matter how many dirty looks the others save Luna gave him. "That Seeker is a dragon, he's burning up the pitch," he sang happily to himself. Luna joined in with enough gusto that Neville did, until Madam Pince came over with a stare almost as menacing as Hermione's. Harry rolled his eyes and made a show of being disgruntled about Draco's showboating, but it was only that: a show.

The minute they were all leaving the library for lunch, Harry pulled Draco behind a statue near the library, which had been seeing a lot of Harry and Draco since the demolition of the Room of Requirement. "Let's ditch the others," Harry said breathlessly. "Spend the afternoon with just me, please, Draco." Draco opened his mouth. "I know OWLs are so soon... and you kept saying you'd start up in earnest revising your new subjects, as soon as you were done Quidditch, but..."

"But what?" Draco whispered, already having a guess. It seemed he didn't need Occlumency to read Harry's mind, as Harry leaned in and breathed in his ear,

"You looked so good when you were playing yesterday. I can't stop thinking about it."

Except it seemed Harry could still surprise him, as he added, flushed but brave enough to whisper, "Last night, I thought about it when I... well, you know..."

Draco's mind shut down. "Harry," he said softly, falling back against the wall. "You can't- bloody hell, you can't just *say* things like that..."

"Coming to lunch or what?" Ron yelled in the distance. Harry gave him an embarrassed but brilliant smile, before running off after the other Gryffindors. Draco sagged against the wall, hand going to grab at the exploding pulse in his chest.

Maybe he didn't have a future *past* the war. But it was hard to consider himself futureless, when the near future was so clear. Care of Magical Creatures and Divination revisions could wait for tomorrow. Today, he was spending the afternoon with Harry Potter.

Was it an eagle? Was it a snake? The world may never know. Luna certainly wasn't telling.

When Draco walked his creative cousin over to Hagrid in the Gryffindor section, he was at a loss. "See, if it were an eagle an' lion, it'd be a Gryffin, o'course," Hagrid fretted, eyeing her headpiece in vain. "Human an' eagle, yeh reg'lar Garuda... Eagle an' horse, that's Hippogriffs... the Pamola, that's a moose... snakes? Never heard o' that kind o' chimera, Luna, I'm sorry to tell yeh."

"That's even better," Luna said happily, "It's my invention," and led Draco over to the Ravenclaw section with her. He dragged her to the front, rather than let her sit them beside her Ravenclaw acquaintances from DA. Apart from the fact that they were traitors, they had Cedric Diggory in their midst. Even there to cheer for his girlfriend, Draco didn't trust his presence near Draco not to irk Harry enough to distract him. And he wanted to win this cup fair and square. Well, at least to give the appearance of winning it fair and square...

Draco spent much of the time before the match cooing over Luna's headpiece, which truly was a thing to behold, a snake head with eagle wings that in truth made him think most powerfully of wyverns or other proto-dragons. She seemed to think her eagle-serpent made perfect sense, since she was supporting Ravenclaw, but their success would mean Slytherin would win the Cup. And who was he to argue with the literary genius of the author of "That Seeker is a Dragon"?

Draco had mocked Harry senselessly for his admission of excitement about watching Draco play, but he had to admit he saw the appeal, as Harry strode out carrying his Firebolt in a knot of crimson, albeit a less impressive one now that the Weasley twins had deserted them not much more than a month ago. Their new Beaters hardly looked like much, though they'd done the trick in the blue loop... but then again, they'd had most of the year to get used to their new role, instead of getting thrown in so late. He willed them to humiliate themselves, with far more optimism than he willed Cho Chang to catch the Snitch over Harry, or at least force him to it before Gryffindor could establish the needed 60 point gap to fully beat Slytherin on aggregate.

Chang should be somewhat more mentally ready, at least, with her boyfriend not tragically dead, but there cheering her on above Draco looking more ludicrously attractive than ever. Diggory, of course, was in training under cousin Tonks to be an Auror, and he looked it.

Look what I gave you, Chang. Me. I was the hero in the shadows, saving this vacant Hufflepuff's unworthy life. I gave you this beautiful, hollow-trunked tree of a man to climb. The least you could do is give me the Quidditch Cup, for the first time in two timelines worth of trying.

Harry was beautiful, and flew like a bright scarlet cardinal out there in the distant sunlight, but Draco could hardly enjoy it the way Harry had seemed to when it was the other way around. It was the cup only on his mind, with the fate of the Kingsnakes and whether they justified their existence a great enough weight to even blot the incredible grace of Harry's flying from his senses. All he knew was the cold numbers, as the red and blue figures on the pitch grew blurrier. He pressed his face into Luna's shoulder, although that was somewhat more difficult with the feathers of the eagle wings poking into his eyelids. He missed having Hermione to hide his face against, but she would be over there, rooting for Gryffindor with the Weasleys with everything she had. He didn't begrudge her that. He was just grateful that Sirius and Remus hadn't showed up again to wear Gryffindor scarves and cheer Harry on. Though after what he'd seen in Harry's mind about the cupboard, he would feel awful to begrudge him that.

Maybe he shouldn't be begrudging Harry any happiness. But Draco was too selfish to want Harry to win the Cup at his expense. Maybe with a war coming, it should have seemed petty and meaningless, but it was anything but. Draco wanted to win the cup so badly he couldn't watch the rest of the match, trying to tune out Jordan's commentary as he moved Luna's headpiece to get a solid faceful of long blonde hair to submerge himself in.

He didn't know how long he was buried there, Luna softly stroking his hair and whispering reassurances, though not scores after he admonished her, until at last she had pulled back and leaped up, calling, "The Snitch! Draco, the Snitch!" He was forced to leap to his feet too to see anything, as the whole school as one gasped at the sight of Chang diving down towards the Snitch right near the grass, with Potter on her tail swiftly catching up to her. Draco grabbed Luna's hand, willing Chang to be fast enough.

She wasn't. Harry caught the Snitch, but as he landed, he wasn't lifting it or celebrating. He was just gasping for breath, waiting, and Lee Jordan's tone told the entire story even before he finished saying, "Harry Potter catches the Snitch! Cho Chang has forced him to it!" That

explained why Diggory was above them screaming his head off, because she had managed with Harry what Summerby hadn't with Draco: been close enough to getting the Snitch herself that Harry had no choice but to catch it. "Gryffindor wins, 230 to 60! We all know what that means..."

"GRINDELWALD!" Pansy shrieked from over in the Slytherin section, and then the two teams on the pitch as they landed had their space invaded by a flood of bodies from the stands, first Slytherin and then Ravenclaw, as Draco and Luna joined the rush of the Kingsnakes onto the pitch. "Grindelwald, we *won*!"

The Gordian Nott

Chapter Notes

Playlist

"Yes!" Draco screamed, rushing over and hugging Pansy, only to come face to face with an ashen-looking Harry, who was just standing there staring at the Snitch like he wished he had never heard such an object existed. "Harry..." His elation faded a bit despite himself at the sight of the desolation on Harry's face. He shook off Pansy and stepped up to him, not daring to reach out and touch him, and Harry was far nobler than Draco could have been. He forced a weak smile, and held out his hand for Draco to shake. Draco did, the touch electric, and shook an even glummer-looking Ron's hand before turning back to his teammates.

As he walked off, he could hear Ron consoling Harry, telling him it was all Ron's own fault for not saving enough shots in their games. He hoped it would help Harry take losing the cup less to heart... and it was bad if Ron blamed himself, but it wasn't like the whole school didn't already know Ron was a shite Keeper... and Draco really might as well be a Gryffindor if his reaction to winning the Quidditch Cup was worrying about how the Gryffindors *felt* about it. "Chang!" he screamed. "CHANG!" Her head turned, where he could see she was already with Luna, and he raced over and waved his arms excitedly before her. "Chang, you won this for us! It was you!"

"She's quite the Seeker, isn't she," Diggory said from behind them, and Chang squealed and threw herself into his very appealing-looking arms. Luna nodded in agreement, looking proud of her house as well as Draco's, and Draco poked happily at the snake tongue on her hat. "I'm proud of you, baby," Diggory told Chang, and they kissed.

Chang pulled back, though, a bit chastened. "I didn't catch the Snitch, though. I never have against Harry, he's too good. I'm sorry, I wanted to for you, Luna- but it was still enough, wasn't it?"

Millie came over, nodding and grinning, with her cheeks smeared from several Slytherin girls who'd come onto the pitch by then, especially Daphne Greengrass, giving her kisses and leaving lipstick marks on them. "More than enough, Chang. Gryffindor ends the season with 380, and we've got 410. If they want to cry about winning all three matches and still losing... well, that's what happened to Draco in third year, so they can *suck his dragon dick*!"

Draco expected at least Diggory to recoil in disgust at that uncharacteristic bit of profanity from Millie, but instead, he began a song even he seemed to have learned: "That Seeker is a dragon, he's burning up the pitch! Malfoy is invincible, and he'll make you his bitch!" Many people around them took up the chorus, Chang and Luna the first, then most of Slytherin, and

then Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw as well, until Draco felt himself being hauled up on Vince and Greg's shoulders.

"Cousin!" Draco yelped in panic, waving his arms, but Luna just waved and kept chanting as his Beaters carried him about the pitch. He couldn't imagine the professors overly approved of some of the lyrics, but there was one who seemed to: Severus, who came forward and let Vince and Greg know that had been more than enough carrying, and if they dropped his godson, they would be forced to look for a new house... perhaps Hufflepuff had space in the dorms...

"SEVERUS!" Draco shrieked, close to breaking into tears, and threw himself on Severus, Muggle hoodie and all, fighting back more emotion. He could see out of the corner of his eye that Gryffindor had long since vacated the pitch, but that much of Ravenclaw's team were still hanging around by Slytherin insistence, the Chasers and Chang in particular getting a hero's encore. "Severus, we did it... Slytherin won the Quidditch Cup... I'll give it to you..."

Severus pulled back, giving him a dubious look. "Is this such a surprise, vain boy? I knew this would be the result when I made you captain. Even in such an unbalanced sport as Quidditch- ultimately, when applied properly, the day will always be won by the most *intelligent*."

"SEVERUS!" was all Draco could bellow in response. He took his godfather by the hand and refused to let him go, dragging him over to the knot of Slytherin players who were assembling before a strained-looking Umbridge, who was guiding Filch as he carried out the trophy. Three out of four houses had stayed in the stands to watch it awarded, and the gorgeous cup with its crossed broomsticks in front had already had 1995-6 with the word SLYTHERIN carved on beside it.

"Severus, thank you, thank you so much, for *everything*," he said, staring at that word in disbelief, as with a disappointed sigh, McGonagall came forward to help put on the velvety emerald green and gleaming silver ribbons to adorn the trophy. "Without you, I wouldn't have... I couldn't have... I wouldn't even be here at all..."

"Draco Lucius Malfoy," Severus intoned. "I will take part in the trophy presentation, if you promise to refrain from any further display of *sentiment*-"

"I love you too, godfather," Draco whispered in response, hugging him tightly around the middle. He couldn't have felt warmer when Severus just gave an exasperated sigh and didn't even pull away.

Umbridge did not protest the presence of their Head of Household at the presentation, nor even Blaise's inclusion, with his own Kingsnakes hoodie reading Assistant Manager rather than a position. But she seemed liable to draw the line at Draco leading Luna up by the hand, even when Luna proclaimed, "I'm the mascot!"

"Professor," Draco said softly, "It's already a disappointment to many people to see you awarding the Quidditch Cup instead of Dumbledore. You wouldn't want this occasion to be further marred by any kind of *scene*, would you? Just play it cool, and for once, this part of your time as headmaster can go smooth as you like..."

Umbridge let Luna stand there as she called out in her loudest voice, "Ladies and gentleman, *hem hem*, your 1995 to 1996 Hogwarts Quidditch Cup champions... Slytherin House!"

Cheers rocked the stands to the floorboards, with all the usual signs having emerged and relocated to the hands of other fans, Daphne with Astoria's, Tracey Davis with Pansy's, and younger Slytherins with Draco's and a plethora of new ones for the occasion: Bulstrode the Wall, Goyle Will Grab You, Creepy Crawly Crabbe, and even signs, for the first time, for what had previously seemed Slytherin's least popular player: Theodore's Nott Gonna Lose! and The Gordian Knot!

"The Gordian Nott," Draco laughed in Theo's ear as they crowded together. "Reckon someone's gonna just try and deal with you with a sword?" But for once, with a Muggle reference, bookish Theo didn't seem to understand the pun.

"Draco, come on!" Pansy called, gesturing him to the front, where indeed, Umbridge was making indignant little *hem hem* noises. "You lift it first, you're the captain!"

"Oh, shit," Draco blurted, and ran forward. It was then he looked up and saw the Gryffindor section had not completely emptied: Hermione was still standing there alone, staring over and smiling. She waved at him, and his heart could not have felt fuller, as Umbridge announced, *Your Champions!* and handed him the cup.

He lifted it in the air, and the pitch vibrated from all the stomping and cheering. He had never felt anything so much like a spell being cast on him without any magic. Just the applause and screams were an enchantment, the affirmation of the choices he'd made as captain, and perhaps other choices too.

Draco passed the trophy to Pansy, who lifted it in turn, while Blaise screamed his head off. "Blaise, lift it with her!" Draco called. "You were part of this team!" Blaise had indeed ran practice when Draco was sick- and wait, Blaise wasn't the only person who deserved to be here.

"Luna! Luna, do you think you could run and find Dobby and Wooky and Nissy?" He had feared Luna would resent being sent off, but she just smiled at him radiantly, reaching out and stroking the trophy for a moment, before sprinting away. Hermione looked quizzical, then Luna gestured her over, and Draco watched his beloved Rat Thieves run off into the sunset.

They returned with the house elves almost before Slytherin were done passing around the trophy and lifting it, person by person and in different assemblages, each time earning a roar from the faithful crowd. Draco had finally prevailed upon Severus to lift it, albeit with much grumbling, and Severus had seemed floored when that earned him a cheer too. But there were gasps at the sight of a Gryffindor and Ravenclaw running onto the pitch, leading on three house elves, bedecked in green and silver scraps from head to toe, or in Dobby's case, the miniature Kingsnakes hoodie he had gotten for Christmas. Hermione gave Dobby a hug, and Draco another wave, before quickly running off from all the Slytherin merriment. Luna, though, stayed right at Dobby's side.

"They were hiding under the stands, watching the whole time!" Luna called, waving her arms. "They've been watching in secret all year, rooting for you and Pansy!"

"Mistress Pansy, Nissy is so proud of you!" Nissy said in a choked voice, Wooky nodding in emphatic agreement, and Pansy shrieked and flung herself on the elves, hugging them in absolute hysterics, in defiance of every rule of class decorum so fiercely impressed by the Parkinsons on their marriageable daughter. But the house elves were accepted as part of the celebration, blending into the midst, when green sparklers began to be set off, by a Montague and Bletchley seemingly determined to be part of the win somehow.

And no one even dared question Wooky and Nissy's presence, nor Draco and Luna picking up Dobby and putting him on their shoulders, for the whole walk back to the castle.

Dobby, Wooky, and Nissy begged off the celebrations once they approached the Slytherin dungeons, but they were all grinning as they left, after Draco yelled out aggressive invitations to his own fast-approaching birthday party where they could properly celebrate with them.

Severus carried the trophy, shaking his head. Draco led him in to present it to the Slytherin common room, which was unrecognizable, covered from rafters to floorboards in foil of green and silver. Severus gave the least inspiring victory speech ever, making brief reference to their championship before informing them all he expected the common room to be spotless first thing tomorrow morning. He did imply, however, that there would be no interruption to whatever festivities they should choose to engage in, in the meantime, and made a show of casting an Inmotus charm around the dungeons before stalking out of sight, robes billowing as dramatically as ever behind him. His exit was greeted with hoots and hollers of joy like he had personally granted them permission to reenact *100 Days of Sodom*, which, given what Draco knew of Slytherins, probably wouldn't be the worst way to describe the kind of festivities about to ensue.

"Luna," Draco said doubtfully, "Sure you don't want to get out of here while you still can?"

Luna considered. "Are you going to let me have any of the Basilisk Brew?"

"The Basilisk- what?" Draco blinked, and she gestured beamingly over to where with a chanting mass of supporters, all four old members of the team had gotten a crystal bowl large enough to hold a mouthful of Basilisk fangs, if not the whole Basilisk. Bletchley was up on a stool pouring in some unidentifiable bright green substance from above, which Draco had the sneaking suspicion might be absinthe, while paler forms of alcohol were being applied by Montague, double-fisting vodka and gin in, Warrington threw in dashes of questionable-looking powders, and Pucey was adding seltzer like the bland but palatable boy he was.

Finally, they declared it ready, and with a large number of glasses summoned, everyone in Slytherin descended en masse on it. Draco got some, only to find himself nearly spitting it out at first taste, as many around them indeed did. He might never have tasted such a strong drink, and he'd had Christmas cocktails mixed by Aunt Bella. As the captain, Draco forced himself to down a whole cup, declaring it sublime, and many followed suit. It certainly did get everyone tipsy almost immediately. Chants of Kingsnakes songs, Slytherin songs, and Weird Sisters medleys began to circulate around the dorm, along with some rather loose applications of firework and fire spells, though Draco stumped just about everyone but Luna

in his rendition of the Muggle song We Are the Champions. She belted it out loud enough for the rest of them combined, already two Basilisk Brews in, and it was only an hour or two before Draco decided it incumbent on him to personally escort Luna back to Ravenclaw. Her eagle serpent headpiece had been lost somewhere along the way, but she pronounced herself happy to go look for it tomorrow.

"Don't worry, I'll be back right away," he called, and had no fear of prefects or teachers giving him shit for being out late tonight. When he walked past Ernie McMillan, all he got was somewhat intimidated congratulations, and then a hasty withdrawal, to keep a happily tipsy Luna from giving him an unsolicited hug. She was already sobering up some by the time they reached the door, but he still called out and found Chang inside, who promised to look after her before sending him off with the command to go party harder.

He was held up on his way back to the Slytherin common room, though, by the presence of someone waiting for him on the bottom of the steps. "Theo?" Draco frowned, startled at the sight of Theo in his Kingsnakes hoodie and black jeans with his dirty blond hair all mussed, and pale face flushed from alcohol, an open bottle of what looked to be sake in hand.

"Grindelwald," Theo laughed, swaying as he stood up. "Draco, I was- was going to wait for you, but it looked so good- here, I've saved this just for us..."

Draco might have laughed it off and gone back to join the others, until Theo pulled him over and held up the sake to show him. It was a large silver bottle, rounded and heavy at the bottom, with a dragon design stenciled in black over the body of it, and words over the katakana that read Kikokuryu Silver Dragon. "Can you deny," Theo laughed, unusually playful, "That this is sake meant for you, Astaroth?" and Draco laughed and followed him as he led to the doors to the Potions storerooms. "You can get in, right? And no one else. So we can have this all to ourselves."

It sounded like good reasoning to Draco, who had also discovered the usefulness of the storerooms as a good emergency place to be alone, albeit before with Harry. With Harry, though, he was terrified of Severus having some invisible alarm tripped and showing up any moment, whereas Severus had all but openly endorsed their Slytherin festivities. So he cast Sanguirenere, nowhere near drunk enough to mess that up, at least not yet, and conjured him and Theo green and silver cushions, and seats rather like Muggle bean bag chairs, along with bluebell flames above he happily tinted green with Colovaria. Then he slumped into his pouf beside Theo and took the sake, giving it a sniff. "Since when are you a sake person, Theo?"

"Since my father went on a sake kick recently," Theo laughed, and conjured them glasses. "He had this whole tasting just for me at Easter. See, it's best taken hot, especially if it's this refined... what are you doing?"

"Unguisubfio," Draco cast, and his lacquered black nails turned to tiny heated brands. He took his fingertips to the cask of sake and let them heat it, while Theo watched in fascination. "It's a Muggle thing, nail lacquer... Luna gave me some enchanted magic version for Christmas, see?"

"It's really warming them," Theo marveled, "I thought you just had blood all over your nails or some poison or something," and earned a dirty look from Draco. "No, that's really cool! And the nails look ho- well, they look nice on you..."

"Unguicotidio," Draco cast, and his nails went back to normal. "Here," he said, and offered the heated sake for Theo to serve them.

"This is a daiginjo... no, Draco, that's not like a *dacquiri*... see, my father's been trying to teach me how to drink since last summer, so we've been doing a world tour of fine liquors, and I know you always talked about wanting sake the most. I had him send some for me. He said only if we win, though. I can't wait to write and tell him!"

"Maybe don't tell him how much we drank, though?" Draco laughed, taking a drink of the apple-scented sake and finding it sweet but pleasantly acrid on his tongue, hot enough to warm his throat long in its aftermath.

"Oh, don't worry," Theo said, dark blue eyes bright, with the taste of fine sake muting the grassy smell of potions herbs behind them. "And I definitely won't tell him it was absinthe in the punch... though I'm not having symptoms of that. I think Montague got ripped off..."

Draco lost track of time all too easily there on the floor in the green-tinted shadows with Theo, with the comfort of someone he'd known since before he could walk, combined with Theo's naturally quiet, easygoing personality and his added graciousness while drunk, heaping compliments on Draco in every avenue he seemed able to think of. It was only when he began to wax poetic about Draco's hair and how well the style suited him that Draco experienced a flash of misgiving, though not enough to not finish yet another cup of the hot sake. He had enough of a buzz to make reality seem a step or two away or slowed, a pleasant haziness to the world that made his alarm as muted as anything else unpleasant in the world. He hadn't gotten quite this drunk since the blue loop, when he'd come home in the aftermath of the Wizengamot's judgment. That time couldn't seem further away, even as he and Theo drifted into reminiscing about times in the blue line.

"Do you remember the first time," Theo said absently, sometime after Draco checked his watch and saw it was past two am, "The first time I ever came to Malfoy Manor? We were, like, four or something, maybe less... I don't know if it's too early for you to remember, but I do..."

"Of course I do," Draco laughed, snuggling back where he was reclined nearly horizontal against all the Slytherin-colored pillows. "I think that's, like, literally my first memory..." It was either that, or Great-Aunt Walburga throwing a fit about some decoration in the hall she thought looked too Muggle-esque. "I was with my nurse, but I'd escaped her... Mother said I used to do that a lot, I kept getting those poor girls fired... and I heard screaming in the gardens..."

"Those albino peacocks of yours," Theo complained, and threw the neck of the sake bottle back, finding it completely emptied between them. "I'll never forget the way that one just went for me and pecked me all over. I was *four*... I didn't know what was going, but then you came waddling over screaming at the top of your lungs, and the peacock ran away..."

"Do you remember the first thing I ever said to you?" Draco smirked, and Theo nodded.

"'The peacocks only attack commoners'," Theo recited faithfully. "But that's not true, is it." He rolled up the left sleeve of Draco's hoodie, pressing his fingers in demonstration over a scar high on the left wrist, by now an imperceptible bit of slightly more pallor. It was from a pecking at maybe six or seven. Draco had complained about it for months after, as he recalled. He'd had a large lychee ice sundae that the peacock had found irresistible. He'd been more bitter at the time over the loss of the sundae, but he'd played up his injury for all the sympathy he could get.

"Maybe I'm a commoner then too," Draco retorted, and Theo shook his head, blue eyes practically glowing. The green tint to the flames made them look almost more like emeralds, like-

"Please," Theo said softly, "You're the most regal person I've ever met," and stroked his fingers over the exposed skin of Draco's arm. It gave Draco the creeps, since below the small faded white scar was the exact place where his Dark Mark had used to be. He hadn't seen the skull and snake there since the fake Moody had made him draw it on himself under Imperius, and for years then before that. But he could still imagine it there clear as day, especially since the feeling of Theo's hands on it hadn't been unfamiliar. Theo had hated the Mark, and tried not to look at it when they were together, but had been kind enough sometimes to put cream on it when it ached.

"Except for my, er, my godfather, 'course," Draco said uneasily, trying to pull his arm away, but the motion just let a very drunken Theo slide his fingers down to intertwine with Draco's.

"No," Theo said confidently. "You... it's you, Draco, you're..." The words seemed slow coming from his inebriated mind, if anything a bit more wasted than Draco. But once they came, Draco very much wished he was sober for this, that both of them were. "I've really liked playing Quidditch with you this year, Draco... I've liked us being close again. It's made me- I've had to think about a lot of things, things I didn't want to acknowledge about you- about myself-"

"Theo," Draco said warily, trying to keep his own drink-heavy head from lolling forward. He managed with effort to meet Theo's gaze, but with their faces a safe distance apart. He didn't have the heart to pull his hand from Theo's yet, as Theo's grip was so strong already he would have to do it violently. His chest was hurting already in anticipatory pain for Theo, if this was what he thought it was. What it might always have been, for Theo to want them to go drink alone- give Theo some liquid courage, and... "Why don't we wait to talk about anything important when we're not, like, um... plastered, and possibly on absinthe, possibly not- depends on the- the Montague's cheapness-"

"No, I, what it is... I need to tell you something," Theo said, taking both of Draco's hands, before looking into his face with a look Draco remembered, fascination without wanting it to be that: desire Theo could never fully admit to himself, even if he was about to try and admit it to Draco. *It's you, it's your fault,* he'd used to tell Draco. *You're the only boy who makes me feel like this- the only* person*, if you weren't so* beautiful, *I could just be normal...*

"There are three acceptable categories for discredit- for disjunction- disclosure," Draco finally finished, the longer word deserting him momentarily. "Disclosure. Only, ah, three. One, more observations on my glorious ineptitude- eptitude- aptitude, ah, as a captain and a Seeker. Two, the presence of *more* sake. Three- ah, I forgot three..."

"Draco..." Theo leaned forward, handsomeness accentuated by the unusual passion that animated it. "Grindelwald, I've tried to pretend... I've tried *so hard*, but I can't lie to myself anymore..." His lips came forward and pressed a clumsy kiss to Draco's forehead, then the side of his head, nuzzling into his hair not unlike Harry always did, although the alcohol on his breath was the strongest scent. Something wary squirmed in Draco's stomach. "Are you really gay like you've always said?"

"Yes," Draco answered, pulling his face back from Theo's, and their eyes met, tension as sharp as the moonstone dagger in the innermost pocket of Draco's hoodie, under the word Kingsnakes. He was suddenly aware exactly of where it was, along with his wand in the other pocket. "Yes, of course- of course I am. What would be the point, lying about that for so-"

"I don't know what I am," Theo said, eyes heavy as they bore into Draco, "But I do know... the way you make me feel- Draco, you're so beautiful. I can never get over how *beautiful* you are..."

"Am I supposed to say thank you?" Draco said, unexpected acid coming to his voice.

"No," Theo said, biting his lip. "Not unless you... Salazar, Draco, if you only knew... I'm trying to tell you- you have this effect on me. So much it throws everything I thought I knew into flux, Draco, it makes chaos out of order... it makes all my conviction into doubt... I'm not sure of anything anymore except for you. I know I like you. I like you so much-"

"Stop," Draco said, pulling his hand away and nearly upsetting the empty sake. "Theo, don't. Don't put yourself through this. This isn't going to end well for you-"

"I like you," Theo insisted, taking a deep breath, and then leaned forward and tried to kiss Draco.

He was slow enough for Draco to push him back, rather gently. Theo's eyes flew back open. He looked genuinely confused, like the possibility of rejection had never been in his calculations. "Draco, do you not like me back? You've always made all these jokes, ever since we were little- before we were at school... even back before second year, Blaise said he thought out of all of us for you, it would be me- and I'm the only one you ever flirt with-"

"Theo, I didn't mean..." Draco took Theo's hand to try and be empathic, but Theo took that as more heated than he meant it, taking Draco's hand and giving it a soft kiss, blue eyes brimming with feeling over it. Draco shivered at the unexpected wetness of Theo's sake-scented lips. "Theo, no, I'm sorry, I can't return your feelings. I didn't mean to lead you on. I'm really sorry."

Theo blinked rapidly, swaying slightly, he was still so drunk. He did not look heartbroken, just still perplexed at the turn the world had taken for him, in this Slytherin-colored light over bleak unpolished stone. "You don't... you're saying you don't like me back?" he said again.

"Draco, I... I know it took me a while to figure out. But I know what I want now. I..." He licked his lips, eyes going darker. He leaned closer to Draco, something more devilish in his eyes. "You don't know the things I *would* do, if you wanted me to..."

No, Theo. I know exactly *what you would do.* "I'm sorry, Theo. No."

"Why?" Theo breathed, sitting back, the first hint of hurt hitting his hazy midnight eyes. "Is there... is there something wrong with me? Are you not actually attracted to me?"

"Theo, no, it's not that. There's nothing... nothing wrong with you." Draco rubbed a hand over his face as he felt the sake belatedly starting to kick in. He didn't feel anywhere close to throwing-up drunk, so he couldn't be that blitzed. But he felt hazy too, like the blue loop was threatening to encroach into the red line, the wants and disillusionments of the past trying to once again become his illusions. "It's not an issue with you, I promise. It's me, alright? Please don't take it personally. Boys, girls, whoever you want, Theo, you're gorgeous, you're rich and smart, you're athletic and talented *and* you're a really sweet person- you've got everything in the world going for you, so just try and move on, you'll have plenty of options-"

"Don't give me that," Theo sighed. "You really think anyone is as good as you? Anyone?" His hand slid over Draco's thigh. "I always thought it would be you and me if I could just be brave enough- and I'm telling you I love you-"

Draco let out a harsh bark of laughter at that. "You *love* me?" he echoed, a world of woundedness he had thought buried roaring back to life. What he would have *given* to hear those words come out of Theo's mouth in the blue loop. They could have changed so much. What he would have given to have Theo act like he even cared in *sixth* year, when he was so alone and Myrtle was still the only one who could talk to- Theo had just wanted to stick his prick in him and run-

Theo *loved* him now, was it? Was that just bullshit to get him in bed? Because what had *changed*? He hadn't been good enough for Theo before. And this was a Draco who didn't even want him! Was it playing Quidditch together, for fuck's sake? Was it that Draco was more powerful? That Theo couldn't *have* him as easily? Draco knew it was the sins of the blue loop in his head, not this younger Theo ignorant of Draco's real resentments, but he couldn't believe it still.

I love you. It took everything in Draco not to laugh at those earnest words.

"You *love* me," Draco echoed. "Right. Theo, I don't think you know what you-"

"What," Theo breathed, eyes almost black in the green light. He pushed the cask away from between them to lean over him, unusual vindictiveness leaping to his drunken face. "And Potter does? Harry Potter loves you?" When Draco was silent, Theo was the one to begin to laugh, a strikingly miserable sound. "I knew it already. I was almost sure. Now it's a certainty, you're with Potter, aren't you? I'm too late, that's the real problem, I waited too long to figure it out, and now you've talked yourself into thinking you'll have some happily-ever-after with that empty-headed-"

"This is between us," Draco snapped. "Don't talk about Harry."

Theo barked out a louder laugh. "Are you doing it with him, Draco? Do you let that brainless half-blood fuck you-"

"You," Draco said, "Are extremely drunk, Theodore Nott. I suggest you consider that fact, and either gather yourself to speak with more circumspection, or else expect me to introduce-" Something about forcing circumspection on him, but his tongue didn't work as well when he was drunk too. "Shut up or I'll shut you up, that clear enough?"

"You and him?" Theo breathed. "You let him touch you? That's disgusting. He doesn't deserve to even kiss your feet. Or what, is that your penance? Kissing *his* feet? Is that how you make up for dark magic? For being a Death Eater's son? For being a murderer? Not to mention, where your wand comes from..."

Theo touched the so-called "Astaroth" pendant on Draco's neck, hanging between them, and Draco shook off his hand and drew his wand.

He expected Langlock to come out of the talon wand, but he lacked the concentration for it. Without the dams on his power tight, the impact would throw Theo back and upset Severus's herbs. So he kept it out without casting, and Theo laughed.

"You're delusional, Draco," Theo hissed, "If you think you can play both sides like this... you try and have it both ways, but you can't. You have to be one or the other, you can't be both. It's not going to change you into a Gryffindor, being *under* a Gryffindor- it's not going to make you any less *you*. And I'm the one who really knows you, not him. He'll never understand you like I do- and he can't change you, not really. He's never going to change that your wand was made for Grindelwald. That's who you really are, *Grindelwald*-"

"CONJUNCTIVO!"

Theo screamed, grabbing at his blinded eyes. Draco was reminded with a pang of grim satisfaction of the sight of the Basilisk in Harry's memories, though he almost missed the streams of red coming down from those eyes.

"What is that wand going to do, Theo? Tell me! Turn me bad? Turn me into Astaroth? To Grindelwald? *I'm already there!* You want me to prove it?" He laughed rather hysterically as Theo went for his wand. "Manibipiscatus!" Theo's wrists snapped over his head, and Theo cried out again in alarm. "Oh, are you scared now? Have any clue who you're playing with when you try and tell *me* who *I* am, you fucking coward-"

"Expelliarmus!" a deep voice yelled, and Draco's wand flew away from him. Severus stood above the two drunken fifth-years, a foreboding figure in his long black nightshirt. He knew better than to pick up Draco's wand, which had sailed to his bare feet. He stepped over it, and went over to Theo with a frown. "Relashio," he cast, "Finite incantatem," and the invisible bonds on Theo's wrists loosened, before he turned to Draco murderously. "Draco, what is the meaning of this?"

There must have been wards to alert of magic in the storerooms, if not already the presence of someone this late. Draco tried in vain to think of an explanation that wouldn't out Theo, but-

To Draco's everlasting shock, Theo pushed his cursed face forward, his voice gone quieter, and said, "No, sir, I tried to kiss Draco, and he didn't want me to. It was my fault."

"Ah, yes," Severus intoned. "And he blinded and bound you for it. *Perfectly* reasonable. Why am I surprised? Come, both of you!" He snatched up a bottle of Ocular potion from the shelf, and took Theo and Draco to his chambers before carefully applying it to Theo's eyes. He let Draco pick up his wand and pocket it on the way there, but his demeanor gave no confusion about what would await Draco should he be so foolish as to draw it.

"I'm sorry," Theo was the one to say first.

"You mean you're sorry now that you're scared of me again," Draco said coldly, and Theo shook his head, making Severus's job a little harder.

"I shouldn't have said those things about you, or your- boyfriend. Or- whatever Potter is to you. It *is* Potter, isn't it? The one that you... I just- I hate that you like him and not me. I guess... I guess I just really thought you liked me, Draco... Merlin, I'm so drunk..."

Severus exhaled in soft exasperation, having to listen to this conversation while treating his two foolish drunken students, so Draco leaned in to let a blind Theo whisper to him. "I shouldn't have tried to kiss you, I'm sorry... I just... I'm in love with you, Draco, I can't help it..."

"*I'm* sorry, Theo," Draco said with a chest leaden with guilt. "I'm sorry I don't feel the same way. I'm sorry if I ever led you on. I..." Severus could clearly still hear, with the expression on his face unspeakably pained.

"Draco," Severus said, "Wait in the other room. I will set up another bed, and you will stay here tonight, to sleep off your disgraceful inebriation. I will assist Mr. Nott before escorting him back to his dorm."

And Severus did, taking the situation in hand. He seemed to sit and talk with Theo far longer than needed to just fix his eyes, but their conversation was muffled magically, and Draco fell asleep long before Theo left.

He was awoken the next day by Severus casting a Lumos right above his eyes. "It is three in the afternoon, Draco. It may be a Sunday, but there are *limits*. Get out of bed before I am forced to physically remove you."

"Oh, no," Draco whined, grabbing at his head, and Severus was indeed the best godfather of all time, as he replaced the light spell with a hangover potion, and helped him out of bed. Draco stumbled over to sit in the one of the chairs before Severus's fire, and Dobby brought them a late lunch. Severus waited until Draco was well-fed and alert from both tea and coffee, hangover nearly already gone, by the time Severus chose to speak to him about the sorry scene he had walked into the previous night. Draco tried to offer his own rambling explanation of how they had gotten to the point of him cursing his Chaser the night they won the Quidditch Cup, but Severus held up a hand.

"Mr. Nott and I spoke at length about those events," Severus said calmly, "Both last night and this morning. He is deeply sorry, Draco, and takes full responsibility for all the unpleasantness that occurred. His exact words were, 'I know how much worse Draco could have cursed me.'"

Draco could see the dark amusement in Severus's gaze. "He is taking the rejection maturely, as I believe he would have from the start, should he not have been so foolish as to make his declaration when severely inebriated. Mr. Nott is usually a sensible, strong-minded young man, who was not at his best last night. I hope that on your part, you will not seek further retribution against one of my very few other students likely to receive an O on his Potions OWL."

"No," Draco said, wrapping his arms around himself. "Theo... if things were different, he's the person I'd..."

Severus's face changed. "Have you given him... mixed impressions?"

"I don't know," Draco sighed, frustrated, and stared at his formless tea grounds, telling himself there was no possible shapes to be seen in them. "Things are just... complicated with Theo. They've always been. But I can't *be* with him. Not even if Harry wasn't in the picture. He's not... whatever he says, he just really wants *sex*, Severus, he's not ready for anything more than that."

"And you *are*?" Severus questioned, earning himself a tired little glare. "No, far be it from me to question your true love with the illustrious Boy Who Lived. Well, Mr. Nott is taking it philosophically, as he seems to with most things. In time, your friendship may recover. It is not as easy as you might think, to carry a deep affection for someone and know it unrequited, let alone that their affections have been won by another you believe unworthy."

Severus might have been the best person for Theo to speak to about that. Draco eyed the silver doe in his peripheral vision, nodding, and Severus frowned. "I am not speaking from personal experience." Draco nodded like he believed him. "I am not-" Severus took a deep breath. "Yes, Draco, I have indeed had such an experience myself, but I swear, my unreturned attentions were *not* towards your father, whatever filth Black may have alleged-"

Draco started to laugh, harder than he had thought he could. "No, Severus, I know. I know you aren't pining after my father." His laugh faded slightly, as more thoughts went through his scattered head. "I thought it was like that with me and Harry, when I was convinced he didn't like me back." Severus looked appropriately guilty in response, given his own role in that misconception. "Severus... I hope it doesn't linger on too long, that pain. I hope it isn't *still* making you unhappy."

Severus looked at Draco sharply, though at least there was no stab at his mind, then stroked his hair gently, almost tenderly. "My burdensome godson," he said softly. "Worry not after my *happiness*. That has never been a question. The question has always been survival."

The Black Opal

Chapter Notes

Playlist

OWLs Timetable

Draco Malfoy

Date	9:30 AM	2 PM	11 PM
June 10	Charms Written	Charms Practical	
June 11	Transfiguration Written	Transfiguration Practical	
June 12	Herbology Written	Herbology Practical	
June 13	Defense Against the Dark Arts Written	Defense Against the Dark Arts Practical	
June 14	Ancient Runes	Muggle Studies	
June 17	Potions Written	Potions Practical	

June 18	Care of Magical Creatures Written	Care of Magical Creatures Practical	
June 19	Astronomy Written	Divination	Astronomy Practical
June 20	Arithmancy	History of Magic	

"Draco, are you sure about this?" Hermione asked, anxiety bleeding through every pore. "I mean, are you actually, genuinely, fully sure that this is necessary? It shouldn't be too late to drop one or two..."

"Yours isn't much better," Draco said defensively. It wasn't like he hadn't taken most of these before in the blue loop, not that he could tell her that. He wasn't going to count on that to carry him through, though, not after this many years. He was in full study mode, as much as everyone else, and the sight of all those full blocks set his heart pounding despite himself.

Ron took one look, whistled, and sat back in his large down chair, very comfortable thanks to Nissy's skill with feather and fluffing charms. "Hey, at least I feel better about my schedule now."

"Hermione's right, Draco," Harry said, leaning over his shoulder. "Do you really need all that to become an Unspeakable? I'm sure McGonagall must have said in your career talk which parts were really necessary..."

"It's not about that," Draco snapped, not wanting to get on the subject of that disastrous meeting if he could help it. "It's about proving something."

"What," Neville said softly, peering over his shoulder as well, looking rather stricken for him. "That you're more than just... your family?"

"Maybe," Draco said tightly. "Maybe I do want to prove that whatever I get, it isn't because of my name. I can get twelve OWLs. I know I can. If *Percy Weasley* did it, I can. Now are we going to celebrate my birthday or what?"

"Once the Slytherins arrive," Hermione sighed, and stuck her head over to where Ginny and Luna were setting up extra balloons in the corners of the cleared trophy room. "Fourth-years! We're done all the scary OWL talk! You can come back over now!"

"Party time!" Luna exclaimed, bouncing over, and presented Draco with a birthday crown made of green and silver balloons. Draco had no intention of wearing such a thing in front of Harry, until he saw she had drawn or enchanted the heads of the long slender balloons to look like snakes, complete with hissing red tongues, and then nothing would do but to wear it. He had an appropriately Slytherin headpiece for the occasion when his housemates arrived.

"Look at this place," Pansy marveled as they walked in, and it was true, between the elves and the third-years, everyone had outdone themselves in decking the room out. No need for the Room of Requirement at all. Everywhere you could see, there were either glitter-embossed silver feathers, or green, blue, silver, and gold balloons, with the piece de resistance courtesy of Neville, who'd decorated the whole long table with a display of Cobra Lilies, all hissing merrily to accompany the sight of Kingsnakes hoodies filing in.

"Look at this cake," Draco countered, staring wide-eyed as an arguing pack of Slytherins wheeled along a cake half the size of Vince, covered in glimmering silvery buttercream, with the unmistakable design of an Antipodean Opaleye, the dragon's body coiling around what looked like a moonlit, snow-covered cliff. "Holy shit, who made this cake?"

There was the pop of Apparition, and then three pairs of bright marble eyes peered up at him, their magic steadying the cake as a burdened heave by Blaise threatened to unbalance it. "Did somebody call for Dobby?"

"Dobby, it's the best cake I've ever seen!" he exclaimed, waving aside all of Dobby's recollections of lavish desserts served at Malfoy galas. "Here, Hermione, get a Polaroid of me with Dobby and it... Wooky, Nissy, did you help too? Get in here... Okay, okay, Greg, I'm sorry, you all hauled it here... couldn't the elves just have magicked it?"

"We is worried about its structural integrity, Draco Malfoy," Wooky said with a straight face, which Draco suspected meant that they had enjoyed watching the huffing Slytherins lug it out of the kitchens, too scared to mess it up by using magic to help. Especially since Pansy did not seem to have lifted a finger to help. But to her credit, she was levitating along a pile of presents from the Kingsnakes, which she dropped delicately one by one onto the growing pile. She ran over and crashed the photo of the elves and Kingsnakes.

There were plenty more Polaroids taken that evening, as everyone proved on their best behavior. Perhaps Fred and George not being present was a boon after all. And everyone was so tired and beaten-down by OWL revisions, Draco suspected they lacked the energy to get up to any verbal sparring. Even Blaise's sharp tongue stayed mainly sheathed, although the basic awkwardness of a half-Slytherin and half-Gryffindor party could only be somewhat ameliorated by the buffer of three house elves and one Ravenclaw.

But everyone gave it their best shot at harmony, albeit with one half of the table decidedly green and the other red with no mixture. Draco could only be bewildered but grateful, remembering days back in first and second year, when he had felt he had no friend at Hogwarts, or even in the world, other than Severus, and then not even Severus. But he was surrounded by friends now, too many to all pay proper attention. Mainly, he kept in the back of his mind the relative locations of Harry and Theo at all times. He had no intention of letting this devolve into birthday fisticuffs. And he was successful, and everyone sang Happy Birthday together in decent harmony at least. And Dobby's cake was incredibly delicious,

although there was something inherently morbid, perhaps, in celebrating Draco's birthday by devouring a dragon.

Theo was very quiet, as he had been since that disastrous night spent drinking together after winning the Cup, hardly more than a week ago. But he was perfectly calm and civil when spoken to, and cracked a smile at a few of Blaise's attempts to make him laugh. He even suffered Luna's decision to make him a balloon crown as well with extreme grace, as she proclaimed how nice her snakes looked on blond hair. The only trouble was, that led to a very miffed Harry demanding a balloon crown for himself as well, and then he was indignant that his didn't match Draco's, not seeming content with his admittedly unflattering golden lion hat.

"If you wear green and silver, Harry, you look like Tom Riddle," Luna said absent-mindedly, and only looked up when the entire Slytherin half of the table fell silent. They knew that name, because of stories of the Chamber of Secrets that Blaise had wheedled out of Draco in third year, and they were not used to Luna casually mentioning it the way that the Gryffindors were. Speaking Voldemort's name, however obliquely, seemed suddenly to throw up an invisible wall between the two halves of the party, red and green in stark opposition. Millie just looked grim, but the boys with Death Eater fathers that Harry had named, Vince, Greg, and Theo, leaned together and began to whisper.

"Well!" Hermione declared with forced gaiety, getting to her feet. "It's time for presents!"

Luna didn't seem to know what she'd said until Neville leaned in and whispered in her ear. She paled, looking very repentant, and Neville pressed another Butterbeer into her hand, squeezing her shoulder reassuringly. She leaned against him as she drank, shooting Draco a penitent look. It was easy with their usual exchange of glances to convey it was no big deal. It wasn't her fault that this group carried a built-in warzone with them, with even the smallest spark threatening to ignite a powder keg inside the trophy room.

The contrast between presents from the Slytherins and the Gryffindors was stark. Ron and Ginny went in together on their present, which they also said was from Fred, George, and their parents: a broomstick polishing kit. Neville got Draco a last-minute Herbology review guide for the OWL. Honorary Gryffindor Dobby got Draco a Kingsnakes hat he looked to have personally knit, and honorary Gryffindor Luna got Draco a small plaque that read, *Two years a Quibbler subscriber. Speaking truth to power, and power to truth.* The Firebolt apparently also constituted Draco's birthday present from Sirius and Remus, so nothing new there. And Hermione got Draco a Muggle book called *The Prince*, which she said she had read in Muggle Studies OWL prep and been reminded of Draco. Every one of the Slytherins but Draco eyed it worse than if she had tried to give him a pornographic film.

The only present that none of the Slytherins sneered at was Harry's, but his brought the opposite problem: they were still staring at it askance, but for being all too lavish. Draco had arranged the dragon models Harry had gotten him for Christmas in his bedroom at Grimmauld, but this was a present he could take with him everywhere: a sheath for Draco's moonstone dagger, slender but woven through with tiny opals and moonstones and threads of real gold, in the design of an Antipodean Opaleye, custom-made, clearly worth a mountain of Galleons. It even struck all the Gryffindors dumb. And the Slytherins got dismayed or

calculating looks when Draco reached into his pocket and took out his moonstone dagger to put it in the sheath.

"It fits perfectly," Draco said, trying to muster some of the admiration he would have had if Theo's eyes on him had not felt like a crushing weight, and Harry gave him an adoring smile, one blind to anyone else in the room with them.

"Figures that Potter would be the sheath to Draco's dagger," none of them missed Millie quipping to Blaise.

"I don't know, you don't think he'd be more the sheath to Potter's dagger?" Blaise mused.

"Yeah, probably," Millie shrugged, only to see every eye in the room on her. "How are we supposed to compete with that?" she said louder, with her own forced cheerfulness, and gestured imperiously at Luna. "Here, get him my present."

Luna rushed to get Millie's, a large package which proved to be an antique, very ornate and decorative silver birdcage. "In case you ever get your own owl," she said, or just for decor, but every non-Slytherin in the room had frozen.

"Is that real silver?" Ron asked weakly.

"Of course," she sneered. "What, jealous, Weasley?"

"Shut up!" Ginny snapped. "Silver's no-"

A look from Hermione silenced her. It took Draco a second to remember that Remus's condition had only been spread around Hogwarts in the blue loop. Millie had no idea she was giving Draco something poisonous to one of his new guardians. But all the Gryffindors did. A new level of awkwardness rose in the air, as Millie looked hurt at Draco's non-reaction, and then at the forced gratefulness he produced, knowing he would have to get rid of it as soon as possible.

Not one, not two, but three of the Slytherins' presents all proved to have silver in them, incredibly thoughtful and expensive and useless. No wonder they thought Draco liked silver. Most of them had been there at Christmas when Draco gave Severus a custom-transfigured and carved nameplate all of silver in second year. Draco managed to put on a better face of thankfulness, but the Slytherins couldn't have appreciated the sudden cheerlessness in the air on the Gryffindor end, when they had refrained from comment on even Muggle presents. They must think it disdain for how much money they were spending, or just for the givers themselves.

Only Theo's present was usable, a truly stunning small black opal pendant on a razor-thin gunmetal chain. And if Draco didn't want to risk encouraging Theo's feelings for him by wearing the expensive jewelry, it was not actually usable either. Draco would have to give it to Luna or something.

The Slytherins didn't stick around long after presents were done, with the air in the room so poisoned. With OWL prep nigh, no one else was inclined to stay over-long either, except for

OWL-less Ginny and Luna. Ginny tagged along with her brothers, whispering worriedly about how they were going to surreptitiously get rid of so much silver, while Luna took one look at Harry and made a graceful exit, prompting Neville to turn and yell down the hall about wanting to walk her back to her common room. They heard the sound of Neville sprinting back before the door shut, and it was just Harry and Draco in the ruins of the party, which Dobby, Wooky, and Nissy had formally forbid them from helping clean up.

"Shouldn't you be going to get in some studying before bed too?" Draco sighed, unsurprised that Harry had stuck around despite Hermione's broad hints of future academic doom. Harry stepped forward and plucked Draco's balloon crown from his head. He'd long since discarded his. "Wait, let's try something. See if Parseltongue will work with it."

Harry frowned, then set the crown back on Draco's head and hissed at it. A second later, Draco heard the squeak of the plastic slithering, and then a small plastic tongue licked at his forehead. Draco gasped. "Harry! That's crazy!" he said ineloquently, and shivered as the snakes climbed down to coil around each of his shoulders, one silver and one green, before Harry Vanished them with a smile.

"You're so creepy," Draco said, and leaned over and kissed Harry like a punch to the mouth, both the pent-up tension of that awful party and the rush of seeing Harry's powers work on even the simplest of snakes coming together to put a force there that surprised them both, making Harry stumble back a few steps. His hands went quickly to Draco's hair, though, and he was licking into Draco's mouth with that clever, Parseltongue-gifted mouth before Draco was the one to pull away.

"Alright, stalker, nice party trick. Go study," Draco said by way of goodbye, and got himself pushed down onto one of the green bean bag chairs by a laughing Harry.

"Seriously?" Harry breathed, crouching over him with a dangerously appealing light in his eyes. "You're going to kiss me like that, then just tell me to go study?"

"You need to study," Draco laughed, but seized Harry by the collar of his robes and pulled him on top of him on the soft chair, giving him three more solid kisses on the mouth before drawing his face back again. He yanked his face away playfully from an attempt to steal another. "Seriously, Harry, Hermione's right. I'm not interested in dating someone with less than seven OWLs-"

"I didn't think you were interested in dating me at all," Harry countered, and took advantage of Draco's consternation at the prospect of that conversation to successfully steal a kiss this time, then let his weight rest on Draco and kiss at his neck. "You're sixteen now," he whispered against the skin there, and sent a shiver all down Draco's spine.

"And you're still *fifteen*," Draco whispered, twisting his head to nip at Harry's ear, "And borderline illiterate at the best of times, so if you're too whipped to take your OWLs seriously-"

"I am not whipped," Harry whined, and his hands fell on Draco's waist. Draco moaned and dragged him in for another kiss, telling himself only one more.

"You are so whipped," Draco laughed, nipping at Harry's lower lip now, and poked at Harry's scar. The next kiss seemed to click into place, both their mouths pushing in at the exact same time and locking together like clockwork, gliding together like something in a dream. Draco's head started turning slowly to mush as they kissed and kissed, his mind full of nothing but the placement of Harry's hands on his waist...

"Dobby does not mean to interrupt," a tentative voice said from above, "But Dobby is wondering if Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy will be wanting to keep the bean bag chair."

Draco dragged his gaze up, and Harry put his glasses back on, only for them to find that Wooky, Nissy, and Dobby had been in the room with them for Merlin knew how long, and had cleaned the entire room save their chair, without them noticing a thing.

Oh, yes. *Harry* was the one who was whipped.

The bad news was, Sirius asked Harry to be his best man. The good news was, it didn't truly count as being one-upped, since Draco was asked the same by Remus. The members of the wedding parties quickly filled out once June started and the solstice advanced closer, the growing heat and sunlight testimony to the turn of season that would mean the excitement and risk of Sirius and Remus's joining. Draco and Harry were the only literal men in the party of groomsmen, which filled out as Tonks and Hermione for Sirius, and Alice Longbottom and McGonagall for Remus. Neville and Ron were to be ringbearers, and Ginny and Luna were to be the flower girls. As for Fred and George? Against everyone's better judgment, the esteemed proprietors of the sensational new business Weasley's Wizard Wheezes had been hired to DJ the afterparty.

The Rat Thieves plus Neville had wracked their minds about traps for Aunt Bella, and Hermione had read through a truly ungodly number of dark magic books, but they were no closer in their grand plan of a counter-trap. Draco's new grand plan was to work on one over the summer- with Harry's help added then, with Harry definitely going to be at Grimmauld, Draco refused to think of any other scenario- and eventually stage some public event to lure on an attack once they had a real plan together. In the meantime, they might very well have to just rely on Dumbledore to keep them safe from Aunt Bella and her Black Dagger in the meantime. There was only so long you could force Hermione to worry about their survival when there were OWLs to worry about.

OWL review week had been torture to sit through the first time, let alone a second. Draco had to constantly fight against arrogance, telling himself that having sat these OWLs once before should be motivation to try harder, not less, because of how internally humiliating it would be not to succeed even with that extra advantage. And for the most part, he managed not to get too distracted, although Harry's mouth was like a black hole where all sentience went to die. But he managed not to get sucked into its gravitational field too often.

If Draco had thought being friends with Hermione Granger could be difficult, he'd never known her in the run-up to OWLs. He had no idea how the original trio had suffered through her in the blue loop without permanently cutting ties. Never had a person been more anxious, and unjustifiably so, over every minute detail which she clearly knew already. And giving her

the lion's share of his calming draughts and draughts of peace wasn't even much help. She was still coming to him at all hours for advice and review help, even shamelessly interrupting him and Harry behind statues a few times, having stolen the Marauder's Map from Harry's things solely to hunt down Draco as her chosen revision partner. She seemed convinced an E in Potions, let alone an O, would be impossible should they not be surgically attached for all three weeks prior to the exams. At least he got to be away from her at night, alone in his bed, although getting interrupted all those times with Harry just made those alone hours all the more busy and frustrated.

At least Hermione had Luna. Luna was a miracle, and she dedicated herself to singlehandedly soothing Hermione during her most frazzled times, with that beatific air of hers that Draco could never match, stroking Hermione's exceptionally bushy hair and whispering lists of goblin wars in her ear. She flitted around the fifth-years consoling and helping review so much, Draco worried about her own exams. But she claimed she and Ginny had made up a timetable and were sticking religiously to a rigorous revision schedule of their own, albeit not as strenuous as one for OWLs. Draco chose not to comment on this distressing hint towards friendship between his favorite cousin and his second-least favorite Weasel, and nodded in faux-approval.

Neville came to the Slytherin dungeons on Sunday night in absolute tears, prompting the most disgruntled summoning in history from Blaise. "There's a Gryffindor at your door," Blaise informed him flatly, "I think he might be dying," and had Draco sprinting in fear only to find a sniffling Neville collapsed at the foot of the entrance. Neville had all kinds of wild fears about flunking out, starting with Charms tomorrow, hardly one of his best classes. And he'd heard Hermione remarking to Luna about how unattractive academic failure was, which couldn't be helping matters whatsoever.

Draco actually took Neville inside the Slytherin common room and cleared an area for the two of them to review together, menacing everyone into giving them space and silence before he cast an Inmotus charm in the prime area right before the fireplace. Then he summoned curtains around them, so no one could watch Neville failing over and over at summoning his own pencil from one end of their little enclave on the fur rug to the other end. When he had to send Neville back, he found Blaise doing something very similar with both Vince and Greg, and offered his own services. Greg came over and worked with him past midnight, until he finally could summon a chocolate frog from deep inside Blaise's trunk, upon which Blaise was so kind as to let a beaming Greg eat it as his reward. Greg had gotten a Troll at Charms last time, but maybe the red line would be kinder to him.

Almost every single Slytherin came up to him in the dorms and breakfast on Monday morning with emergency review questions. He fielded them with grace, taking them as the penalty for having shown off in Charms with Umbridge earlier that year, and anyway, they helped distract him into successfully convincing himself he didn't have any anxiety of his own. He was amused to see Vince and Greg come over to him to enact the same ritual of Greg's as last time, squeezing the end of the quill of the smartest person at the subject, with the superstition it could grant them some of their powers. It hadn't been Draco but Theo last time for Charms, and Hermione for one or two subjects. She'd just thought they were trying to steal her quill, and set Ron to drive them away.

As they sat down, Draco impulsively reached over and squeezed the end of Theo's quill for himself. "You're better at Charms than me," Theo said doubtfully.

"Not the written," Draco said grimly. "I've stolen your powers, Nott. The Malfoy troll will return in your OWL results..."

Theo gave him a weak but very pretty smile, and then McGonagall turned over her hourglass, and their OWLs officially began.

Vince and Greg were an absolute wreck at lunch, proclaiming they hadn't known half the answers. Better than the blue loop, when they had been complaining they knew *none* of them. Draco had found the written almost laughably easy- Charms was indeed one of his best subjects- and expected to have an easy rest of today and tomorrow, with another best subject in Transfiguration up next. He eyed Gryffindor speculatively, not Harry for once but Neville. Maybe with Neville anxious about Transfiguration, he could trade him for some last-minute review time, with that Herbology guide Neville had gotten him?

Finally, after an eternity spacing out daydreaming about Harry's shoulders, Flitwick called out, "Macmillan, Ernest – Malfoy, Draco – Malone, Roger – Nott, Theodore."

He squared his shoulders, smirked at Theo, and drawled out, "Ready to have your charms look sub-par in comparison to mine, gentlemen?" To his surprise, none of them looked offended or amused, just terrified, even Theo, as if they all took him at his word. And *Theo* had never had any trouble at the Disillusionment charm.

Draco managed to produce a Disillusionment charm, after several tries. And otherwise, he did have an easy time of it, especially compared to Harry, who he heard asked to produce a Color Change charm and produce a Growth charm instead- honestly, how did you confuse Colovaria with Engorgio? and far better than Ron, who Draco overheard telling Harry he had turned a dinner plate into a massive mushroom. Neville had some bizarre story about having turned Tofty's hat green instead of the rat.

"Don't worry, Neville," Draco said comfortingly, "It was an improvement, aesthetically speaking. Now, speaking of green, if you've been planning to review for Herbology..."

Revising for Herbology with Neville did a world of good, as Draco left not just his Transfiguration exams but also his Herbology ones feeling almost surreally confident. And Neville proclaimed himself pleased with the results of his Transfiguration exam in turn, though he attributed all his success to Draco when Luna praised him for his story of Vanishing his iguana in one try. "It's just that your cousin helped me," he said, blushing fiercely, and she shook her head.

"No, you've gotten better at spells, Neville Longbottom," she said contentedly, and Neville looked like the ceiling had just opened up to let in a choir of angels singing blessings down at him.

"You're st-st-still way better than me," he stammered, and Luna nodded.

"That's probably true," she agreed.

The only problem came on Thursday, when it was time for Draco to face a Boggart in the Defense practical, with Umbridge to the side watching besides. He didn't know how it had somehow slipped his mind, when he had taken this exam before. Maybe it was because it had been such a non-issue, laughing away his albino peacock.

"I can't handle Boggarts," he told his examiner, Professor Marchbanks, in the softest voice he could. "Is there any way I could do something else to replace it?"

"This is part of the exam, young man," she said, looking sympathetic but firm, and he took a deep breath before she opened the closet.

Beside him, in the middle of a successful counter-jinx, Neville stopped moving and froze like he'd been Petrified at the sight of Bellatrix Lestrange stepping out of the shadows. If her face hadn't been instantly recognizable to some before, it definitely was with months of newspaper covers and wanted posters bearing that cackling face.

"Draco, my pretty," she called, with that voice he now knew only in his head, like Occlumency lessons. He tried to stand firm, but it was all he could do to keep from fleeing. Behind him, he saw Neville fall to the floor, mouth open with no sound coming out.

"Forfeit the wand," Bella laughed, "Or forfeit your hands," and with paralyzing slowness, her hand stretched out in what looked like it was meant to be a gentle caress...

Over in the corner, Professor Umbridge had already shrieked and begun to lead a mass exodus out of the Great Hall, screaming, "Lestrange! Lestrange! It's Bellatrix Lestrange!"

That put an end to the practical exam for a while, and got Draco out of having to face the Boggart at all. Marchbanks herself had taken a few instinctive steps back. The only person brave enough to step forward to the messy-haired, cackling, hooded-eye figure of Aunt Bella was, of course, none other than Harry Potter. He took one look at the chaos that had erupted and stepped forward in front of Draco, even though his own Boggart was a Dementor.

A Dementor appeared, and Harry cast Riddikulus and made it laughable and banished it back into the wardrobe and shut and locked it, all while Draco had fallen to the ground, trembling. When the screaming had faded, he found his gaze caught not by Harry's, but Neville's.

Neville didn't look angry at him, though. Slowly, he crawled over and hugged Draco around the shoulders, before stumbling back to his own examination station. Harry did the same, before letting Draco head over to a sobered Professor Marchbanks, who had to live with it on her conscience that she had been forewarned and still caused a riot. Well, in her defense, Draco could have been more specific.

"I'm sorry, dear, you did warn me," she said in a low voice. "We'll just leave that section off your exam entirely. It's safe, everyone! Remember, we're testing the students on Boggarts!"

Draco thought he did enough to still get an O like the first time on. Marchbanks seemed in a penitent rather than judgmental mood towards him, and let him show her any spells he wanted for extra credit, which turned out to be quite a few. Not only his Patronus but his various shielding spells seemed to impress her *and* the onlookers. Perhaps enough almost to forget that when push came to shove, Harry Potter still had to step up and save him.

The Gryffindors began to feud that weekend over nothing in particular, Hermione in a bad enough mood to shatter glass by looking at it. Draco naturally took her side. That meant a very grim weekend, none the least because she found out he had not made the same mistake as her on their Ancient Runes exam, and mixed up ehwaz with eihwaz. She was at least sympathetic when Draco fretted that he'd accidentally written Grindelwald in place of Hitler a few times on a Muggle Studies essay question, about ethnocentric ideologies in wartime.

"It's a mistake anyone could make, they were similar figures in some ways," Hermione soothed him. "If anything, it demonstrates a strong understanding of analogies..."

"You know the other Slytherins *call* me Grindelwald, right?" Draco sulked.

"As long as no one's calling you Hitler," Hermione said primly, "All is not yet lost."

They had a Valerian root tea on Saturday morning with Severus, which he agreed to serve Hermione as well, on the grounds that Draco would whine for days if he did not. Otherwise, they did nothing but revision. Except it seemed like half the population of Gryffindor Tower mobbed Draco on Sunday night begging for help with Potions revisions. And he obliged, offering the most soothing platitudes he could think of to Neville, all while inwardly fearing he didn't have a prayer.

But Neville didn't melt his cauldron, at least, and without Severus in the room, he seemed positively chipper throughout proceedings. "I thought that would be so much worse," he told Draco as they left, and Draco slung an arm around his shoulders.

"Trust me," Draco said companionably, "No matter how you did on that exam, Neville, you're never coming close to how badly I did against that Boggart."

Harry approached the Care of Magical Creatures exam with extra determination, as he seemed to think all of their performances would reflect on Hagrid as a teacher. Draco, for one, was finding all of the Gryffindors fretting over poor Hagrid's fate tiresome, knowing that Dumbledore would soon be back and everything would be fine. But he didn't want to seem excessively heartless, so he feigned similar concern. And he was concerned for himself, not having taken Care of Magical Creatures for years and years, but between his old classes and Hagrid's private lessons, he seemed to do just fine. Divination was a bit more difficult, namely because it turned out that the exam was to be held in the Divination Tower, and Draco had to awkwardly explain to the examiners that he was banned for life.

But eventually, when they got him a crystal ball and the like in an empty classroom, he performed well enough. He remembered all the symbols and terms, even if his reading was entirely made-up. He exited from his private exam with renewed curiosity from his year over

what he had done to be banned, and sedately ignored them, setting them all off on a great panic instead pretending to be worried about the Astronomy practical that night.

The Astronomy practical was as disastrous as Draco remembered, with the sight of Umbridge attacking Hagrid below them, and McGonagall getting hit by the bright red light of four red stunners in the chest. It affected him very differently, and not just because of personal connections with those outlaw professors now. They were both supposed to be guests at Sirius and Remus's wedding. Wherever Dumbledore was, though, Harry thought Hagrid might be going to join him. And maybe that would be where they ended up having this mysterious wedding. If the Ministry couldn't find it, and presumably the Death Eaters couldn't either, it might be a promising location. Too bad Malfoy Manor was out. That was where Draco's parents had gotten married.

Draco rose early on Friday to get in last-minute review for Arithmancy, which was a piece of cake compared to History of Magic that afternoon, even though he'd already taken the latter. But History of Magic was the last, and in the excitement that followed the conclusion of their final OWL, the other fifth-years managed to all get together and give Draco an impromptu round of applause, even Zacharias Smith grudgingly clapping for the only one of them who had taken all twelve OWLs. And unlike the blue loop, Harry hadn't passed out from the heat. Maybe having Draco as his... whatever he was, was inspiring him to take better care of himself this time around.

All of the talk after the OWLs were officially done turned to the wedding and how they were going to handle it. Hermione had forbidden them from so much as thinking about it, but the plan before had been to take a Portkey with McGonagall from her office as a group. They were all members of the wedding party, and McGonagall was a groomsman. Draco suspected Remus would ask Frank Longbottom to stand up there alongside his wife to even up the numbers now.

Harry went off to speak to Sirius by his two-way mirror, and pulled them all aside in their conspiratorial seven to inform them that Dumbledore had sent a timed Portkey out of Hogwarts to McGonagall before her unfortunate encounter with Umbridge's thugs, since given to Flitwick, and that Flitwick and his office would serve as their new port of call, early on Saturday morning. Umbridge showed no signs of trying to put a stop to this by reversing Dumbledore's permissions, which Draco suspected was due to the threats he had given her during her apprehension of the DA members. These Gryffindors could harp on all they wanted about all you need is love, but this festival of love would be impossible tomorrow without a good Slytherin helping of fear.

"It won't be the same without Hagrid and Professor McGonagall," Hermione said sadly, and Draco seized her shoulders and made them sway with a goofy grin.

"But that won't stop you from dancing with me, Striker? Will it? Will it?"

"Draco," Luna said, in a more serious tone than usual, "Can I speak with you? Alone?"

"Oh, cousin, don't worry, you'll still be my first and most important dance partner," Draco cooed, and Luna just shifted from foot to foot, uneasy.

"I haven't wanted to bother you before you were done your OWLs," she said, so nervously that Draco feared she was about to try and back out of being a flower girl. Lucky they still had Girl Weasley for the task. Hermione had thought it was Remus being nice, doubling up on the positions of ringbearer and flower girl to give all the Hogwarts students an official role in the wedding. But Draco had suspected, and still maintained, that Remus was wise enough to know it was best with this lot to always have yourself a spare.

"Come on, then, Luna," Draco said, putting an arm around her shoulders. "Talk in the trophy room?" He looked back at Harry. "You have your cloak on you?"

"Sure, sure," Harry said, well-trained, and handed it over to Draco without a word, before looking shifty. "You think, uh, maybe, if you don't need to talk for, uh, whatever it is too long-"

"You can make out with him all you want at the wedding tomorrow," Ron said, and dragged him off sputtering, with the other Gryffindors all laughing as they departed.

Draco didn't bother with the cloak on the way to the trophy room, though he had the feeling they might be here long enough to need it later. "So what is it?" he asked, summoning them cushions, and Luna hovered there fidgeting for a while before he could coax her to take a seat beside him. He hadn't seen her look this bashful in years.

"If you wanted to go celebrate your OWLs being over with Harry..." she mumbled.

"What I want is to know," Draco said with emphasis, "Is what you're so nervous to tell me."

"It's more of a question, really," Luna fretted, then peered up at him through her curtain of light hair with a look on her face like she knew herself doomed, but was carrying on nonetheless. "You and Hermione were talking about dancing. And I just... I suppose I was wondering whether you thought I should dance with Neville. At the wedding."

"You don't need my permission, if that's what you're asking," Draco said, surprised to hear such a mundane question. Even if he knew that after her first year, romance could never be a simple, mundane, completely safe thing for Luna again.

"I was just wondering whether you think he'd like to," Luna sighed, and Draco pushed her hair out of her face. She looked to miss having it to hide behind. He grabbed her hand, then wrapped his arm around her shoulders. She pressed her face against his chest and mumbled out her words against it, seeming to take some kind of comfort from it.

"Because I don't think he'd ask me again. And I know you say he likes me, but I've always thought I missed my chance, when I said no to the Yule Ball... Except, when he thought I was asking him to the wedding, it was like... Maybe he wanted to be my date."

Draco felt a smile growing across his face that he couldn't repress. "I should congratulate him. He's managed to be so obvious that even *you've* started to catch on that he's mad about you."

Luna pulled back to give him a pouty look. "He can't possibly have been as blatant as *Harry* was, and you had no idea for so long..."

She was just proving his point. "Okay, and now I've got my head out of my arse, and gone after what I wanted. And so far, the results are spectacular. Are you saying you want to follow suit?" Luna shrugged, snuggling back against him, and Draco was filled with misgivings. "Does it scare you, the thought of dancing with a boy? One touching you other than me?"

"I don't know," Luna said, her standard answer when it came to Neville. "Maybe I'm scared that I'll be scared. But I... I'm more scared I'll throw myself at him and make a fool of myself and ruin our friendship. He's such a very good friend. He's a very good *everything*."

That begged the simplest question. "Luna, do you like him?"

Her answer was, of course, "I don't know." But what she went on to say answered the question quite well. "Ever since I kissed him under the mistletoe, it's- I catch myself staring at him. He's gotten so much more tall and muscular. He's gotten so handsome," she sighed, and Draco's eyebrows climbed towards his hair. "He's got these deep kind dark eyes, and I like staring in them... And I like his biceps as well. I keep noticing... I used to think about Tom, but I've started thinking about him instead."

Draco reached out and petted her hair. No wonder Tom had been on her mind, if only because he was finally starting to leave it. "Is that a relief?"

"I don't know," Luna sighed, her new catchphrase. "I suppose that in a way, it's almost scarier, because it's real and it could happen..."

"So you don't know what you want," Draco prompted.

Except Luna did seem to know, more than she wanted to admit to herself. "I want to kiss him again. And... And I want to dance with him. I've regretted saying no to the Yule Ball so many times. Not that I didn't love going with you. But you should have gone with Harry. And I can just sit there imagining me and Neville waltzing. Neville's a good dancer..."

"Oh, is that what you fancy about him?" Draco teased, and she took him seriously.

"Well, that," she said dreamily, "And he's so sweet and so kind and he makes me feel special. And he's so gentle, and so loving to his parents, and he's so tall. And he's so good with plants and he knows the most interesting things. And he's so cute when he gets scared, but then when he's brave he's so... I don't even have the words..."

When she finally stopped, she had made Draco's mind up sentences ago. "Luna, you have to dance with him. I guarantee you he will not say no."

It seemed to be the answer Luna had wanted, scared as she was. She peeked up at him with trepidation but a growing nerve in her pretty blue eyes. "Promise me?"

"I promise."

"But what if I freak out?" she breathed, immediately reverting to doubt. "What if all I can do is think of Tom?"

"Then signal me and I'll cause a distraction." That was the easiest component to all this. "No worries. I'm perfectly willing to ruin the big wedding for the sake of my favorite cousin."

"What will the distraction be?"

"Have to work out the details, but I'm pretty sure it will involve dark magic," Draco said nonchalantly, and made her giggle. "Worst comes to worst, liquid Fiendfyre is not off the table. Anything for my Luna-Luna!"

It had just become that small bit more imperative that Draco project calm and security throughout the wedding tomorrow. Which made it unfortunate that Draco found himself completely unable to sleep. He went to the Potions storeroom, stole a sleeping draught, and yet even that could not fully silence his mind, replaying every detail of the warning Severus had given on Easter Sunday about plans of attack. What had happened to all of his brave talk about hunting and killing Aunt Bella? What had happened to the talk of counter-ambush? How was he still reduced to just hoping their precautions held and he and those he cared for were kept safe?

It was selfish of Draco, but he couldn't stop himself from shaking Theo awake. Theo rolled over with rather less alertness than one would hope, for someone with a Death Eater father, and had an instinctively pleased look on his face when he saw it was Draco. Then he put on annoyance for having been woken, especially once he saw the time on Draco's watch was past two. Draco put a finger to his mouth, pulled Theo out of bed, and dragged him out of their dorm into the Slytherin common room. He was quick to state his purpose, lest Theo think he had more prurient intentions.

"Have you heard anything about an attack on my uncle's wedding tomorrow?"

"I didn't even know Sirius Black was getting married," Theo yawned, adjusting his silk Slytherin-green pajamas, and at the sight of that body he had used to spend so much time coveting, Draco felt nothing but further anxiety. He couldn't trust Theo not to lie to him anymore, he realized, even if it was a matter of life and death- maybe especially if it was. This was the red line.

Maybe he hadn't really been able to in the blue loop, either.

"Don't play dumb," Draco hissed. "Listen, Theo, I know things have been... difficult between us. But I don't think you want to see me dead. I *hope* you don't-"

"Of course I don't, Draco," Theo sighed. "If you think *I'm* plotting against you-"

"No," Draco said steadily, watching the way the firelight moved over Theo's face, as if that could give some index as to innocence or guilt. He had awful thoughts about the Veritaserum he knew had been replenished in the Potions storerooms. "I just think you might know

something, and you might not want to tell me, because you have to protect your father too- but Theo, you know if there is an attack, I'll fight, don't you? I'm not a fucking coward. If someone comes after my uncle, I'll fight by his side. And if I have to go down with him, then I'll go down-"

"Draco, I don't think anything is going to happen," Theo sighed, and looked sincere. "I certainly haven't heard anything. This is about the Black Dagger, isn't it? You think your aunt is going to use this to come after you, don't you? And you're still terrified of her. Your Boggart..."

"I would be so happy," Draco whined, "If no one ever said the word Boggart around me ever again-"

"I hope you're not in danger," Theo said, and reached for Draco's hand before he seemed to think better of it. There was some indefinable emotion in his dark blue eyes in the firelight, something he was trying to keep out of them.

Maybe he really was in love with Draco. Not that it mattered anymore.

"Even if anything does happen, Draco, you're such a great wizard, I'm sure you'll be alright..."

"I'm not worried about *myself*," Draco said, and Theo laughed.

"When did you ever get so selfless?" he wondered, and Draco gave him a dirty look.

"Never say such a disgusting thing again. I am not *selfless*," he said indignantly. "I just don't want the ignominy of having let any of my associates be murdered by my aunt. People know of the blood feud. It would almost be like she had *won*."

"We can't have that," Theo agreed, a smile on his pouty lips. "But what am I supposed to do? Reassure you nothing's going to happen? Draco, I'm not involved in that world. I wouldn't know one way or another." He stopped and considered. "You know, there *are* protective enchantments on the necklace I gave you. Warding against tracking, natural disaster, and basic hexes. Does that make you feel any better? You could wear that."

"I gave it to Luna," Draco admitted, and tried not to see the hurt in his eyes. "It just, er, suited her better, Theo... you know I always wear Astaroth, and I'm more of a white opal, not a black opal person..."

"Of course you have your own special *opal* preference," Theo said fondly, and pushed back his dirty blond hair, lips twitching. "Draco, the enchantments aren't just run-of-the-mill stuff. They're keyed directly to you. Wear the black opal tomorrow, alright?"

Draco would have suspected a trap there, perhaps the very tracking that Theo claimed it protected against, were it not for the fact that he'd already had Severus check it over when he first got it. "Okay, I will. Not that I'm going to need to, right?"

"Not that I know of," Theo said firmly, and led him back to their dorms. "Now get some sleep. I know you're not going to want dark circles under your eyes for your uncle's wedding."

They gathered in Flitwick's office early the next morning, Draco, Harry, Ron, Hermione, Luna, Neville, and Ginny. Sirius had insisted upon a Muggle dress code, as if the observation of one House Black tradition in a solstice wedding had to be counterbalanced by something that would make all his ancestors roll in their graves. But as members of the wedding party, they had been told their outfits would await them, and showed up in their robes and uniforms, bleary-eyed until Hermione passed around a thermos of very strong coffee.

As they waited for the time of the Portkey's activation, Draco pulled Luna aside. "Did you get the note I enchanted for you?" He hadn't been sure it would make it all the way to Ravenclaw in time, but she nodded and fished out the black opal necklace. He slumped behind her and quickly put it on, though he put it under his robes, a gesture like putting away his own paranoia.

"Oh, and Hermione has something for you too," she said brightly, and went back over to the group around the Portkey, which was a copy of the sixth-year Transfiguration textbook.

Hermione came over, looking quite surreptitious. She was glancing at everyone but him and Luna in the room, especially Professor Flitwick. "Here," she hissed, passing him a vial out of the side of her hand like it was some kind of shady back-alley Potions deal. "This is the plan. The only plan I've really managed for us in time. You... you get it, Draco? See? You know what this is? Just in case. I hope we won't need it, but we have to be prepared somehow..."

Draco looked down at his palm and saw a glint of red. "Yes, I understand," he said with a sinking heart, and quickly pocketed it. He put it beside his sheathed moonstone dagger, because it wasn't like having it anywhere on his person would spare it, should the vial's contents be unleashed, ever-burning or not. He told himself he hadn't suddenly began to smell smoke.

"Only if you need it," Hermione cautioned. "And only for You-Know-Who himself. You understand why, don't you?"

Slowly, Draco nodded, they were called over to the textbook, and he put his hand on it with the rest, where they were whirled away, into the face of a very bright sunrise. Then Sirius was grinning down at where their large group of teenagers had fallen, looking more handsome and brilliant than the dawn, with great dark broken towers silhouetted behind him in the glare, telling them, "Welcome to Citadelle Xaphan."

Citadelle Xaphan

Chapter Notes

Playlist

According to Sirius, the security for Citadelle Xaphan was foolproof. Considering that Draco himself was a Black, and yet had not even known they *had* a citadel, he was inclined to agree.

"You thought Malfoy Manor was a castle?" Draco whispered in Harry's ear. "*This* is a castle."

"No, it's ruins," Harry said, and it was true. The place had fallen into decay, with only one or two of the many towers fully intact. Sirius gave them the tour, which proved the crumbling status of many of the sections and battlements, all in ancient-looking black stone, and all in various states of disrepair. But there were two things, Sirius assured them, that were very much as good as the day they were made: the magical wards, and the high walls.

"It's an island!" Luna exclaimed, peering through the view hole in the wall too steep and towering to climb. She pulled back to let them all see one by one, and sure enough, when Draco pushed his eye to the hole, he was confronted with ocean blue.

"How did you know it was an island?" Neville marveled, and Luna gave him an unusually shy smile. Clearly, her mind was on the task she had set herself for later, of asking him to dance.

"I thought so, from the rounded shape of the walls, and they all look high over the cliffs, as far as we can see," she explained, and she was right. The ocean was below a great fall of white cliffs, which made Draco suspect the location of the island even before Sirius told them: The Isle of Xaphan, not far off England's south shore, secret and Unplottable. It was a family secret so well-concealed, Sirius proclaimed himself the only Black to know its location.

"Only the male heir to the lordship is ever supposed to be granted the knowledge of Citadelle Xaphan," Sirius explained. "It was a fortress back in the day, but in modern times, it was kept in reserve as a retreat for the heir. Which would have been great when I was on the run, except it's in such a state of ruin, I could hardly have stayed here. But we can spend the day here at least. Long enough for me to get married! And to show the heir."

"So you're telling *me* now," Draco drawled, only to experience a sudden pang when he thought of Harry beside them. But Sirius just nodded.

"I thought of it when I remembered this hilarious letter from Bella, begging me to tell her where it was, so she could get married to that noxious Lestrange at Castle Black, the way the ancient Black warlords used to in the medieval era. Apparently your mother also wanted to marry your father here, but *she* didn't beg me. She had more dignity than that."

"And you're sure Aunt Bella doesn't know?" Draco persisted, and Sirius shook his head.

"Do you think Remus, let alone Dumbledore, would have okayed this location if there was any chance of that?" Sirius laughed. "And she can't get through the family wards, Draco. Dumbledore checked that for us. Her blasting off the tapestry ensured-"

"Bloody hell, I forgot, the tapestry," Draco blurted. "Sirius, I haven't figured out how to get Remus on the tapestry, I'm sorry-"

"Draco," Sirius said, and strode forward and gave him a massive hug. "Look around us." He gestured to where there were already Weasleys and other order members setting up tents and arches and displays of flowers in front of the castle, on the broad plain between the front battlements and the wall. "None of this could have happened without you. We can wait to have me and Remus on the tapestry for a little longer."

There was no moat, but with the place itself an island, there was water to protect them. Draco had the time to take a bit of a stroll around the walls and then the castle itself, feeling permitted by Sirius's gratitude to inspect the ancestral holdings. The sun rose higher above them, and made more of the ancient ivy curling around the jagged stone obvious, its green sheen almost swamplike in places. The stone itself was not faded nearly as light a gray as one would have thought, as if there was some magic in it, and also perhaps because a great deal of the stone, unusually, seemed to be obsidian.

The obsidian designs and embellishments, between levels and between tower windows, were often greyhounds or snakelike, and far less dilapidated than the mundane stone, casting an eerie contrast, though one largely swallowed up by the plants that had entwined all about to mark the passing of centuries. The most striking of all was the massive ebony gargoyles, dark-winged angels with triangular devices in their hands, which closer inspection revealed to be bellows. What Citadelle Xaphan was more than anything, though, was *huge*. All of the bright red and gold and white decorations for the wedding were dwarfed by the might of scattered mountains of stone.

The weather seemed to be holding, as predictions had said it would, for once sunny all day, for an outdoor wedding. When Draco finally strolled back, he found four of the five eldest Weasley boys levitating red chairs over on either side of a splendid golden walkway for the wedding aisle, with Mrs. Weasley and her very much recovered-looking husband at front with Frank and Alice Longbottom. All four were fussing over the arrangement of crimson and amber roses around the wedding arch. They called out greetings.

Fred and George seemed in exceptionally high spirits, in part surely because of the great success they alleged so far for Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes. Draco knew from the blue loop that it would be successful, even through the war. He wondered if they had in stock Peruvian Instant Darkness powder yet. But if they didn't, it wouldn't do to go asking them for it.

Remus called him over to a tent with some sort of air conditioning spell inside, and lots of different areas cordoned off. It reminded him a bit of the Weasleys' tent at the World Cup final, but it was more like a costume trailer, with racks of clothing and sections for people to change. To the side, he could see Hermione having a gorgeous white dress fitted on her by a tailoring charm courtesy of Tonks, who seemed as fair a hand at those as Draco's mother. The dress had short sleeves, an opal sheen to it with silvery threads woven through, and an Empire waist, spilling loose down to her knees. Luna and Ginny were waiting for the same in matching dresses, while on the other side of the room, Neville was emerging looking dismayed in a suit whose trouser legs were far too short for him.

"Don't worry, Longbottom, I'll sort you out when it's your turn!" Tonks yelled across the tent, and Neville flushed and hid behind one of the folding screens.

Neville's suit was a shiny white as well. "Is the whole wedding party all in white?" Draco asked skeptically. "Remus, I thought you said you and Sirius were wearing white too..."

"Are you worried whether we'll stand out enough?" Remus asked, and his gaze softened as he stared over at Sirius, who was still in jeans and a T-shirt, fussing over helping Harry with his tie. "Well. That's never really a problem for Sirius Black..."

"I bet you're going to look very handsome too," Draco said, "But as your best man, I refuse to let you go out of there without first receiving my formal approval. I assume photographs are being taken, or else I'll have to bust out my Polaroid camera. I am not letting my Uncle Remus look shabby in comparison-"

Remus laughed softly, turning to him in amazement. "Uncle Remus?" he echoed.

Draco shifted his feet shyly. "You will be after today, won't you? Don't worry, I'll figure out how to get you on the tapestry this summer..."

"Draco, you should come get dressed! You're the only one who isn't!" Ron called, and Draco did a double-take. Either that Muggle ensemble really suited Ron, or else Ron was finally starting to grow up, and growing up nicely. Draco would have to watch Hermione closely around Ron, to see if she noticed how well Ron's Keeper's Build was set off by it already, even without full tailoring, and how it made his red hair stand out, lovely rather than garish. If she had an attraction to Ron in this timeline, this would bring it out.

Draco went over with the intention of getting dressed, and found himself getting sidetracked, because bloody hell, forget Ron, that suit sure did things for *Harry*, didn't it? Whoever had picked the Muggle clothes- Draco suspected it was Sirius- had a better eye than Draco had ever given him credit for. Or maybe Harry was just that gorgeous. He looked fit to be the groom himself, with Sirius finally getting his silver tie properly in place. He straightened his glasses and smiled over at Draco, and Draco stumbled over Ron's fancy white shoes.

"Cannon!" he bellowed, as if it was solely Ron's fault that Harry was a walking wet dream. Chastened, Draco went behind the screen to put his own suit on. Which, as the mirror was happy to inform him, suited him far less than the others, with his marked pallor.

"It washes you out so, dearie," the mirror lamented, and Draco just fixed his S clasp in place in his hair and gave it a toothy smile. Merlin, did he hate mirrors.

"Today isn't about me," he told it, and steeled his shoulders before walking back out.

At least, from Harry's look upon his emergence, *he* didn't seem to agree with the mirror.

Guest List

Delacour, Fleur

Diggory, Cedric

Doge, Elphias

Dumbledore, Albus

Figg, Arabella

Fletcher, Mundungus

Granger, Hermione

Hagrid, Rubeus

Jones, Hestia

Longbottom, Alice

Longbottom, Frank

Longbottom, Neville

Lovegood, Luna

Malfoy, Draco

McGonagall, Minerva

Moody, Alastor

Potter, Harry

Shacklebolt, Kingsley

Tonks, Nymphadora

Weasley, Arthur

Weasley, Bill

Weasley, Charlie

Weasley, Fred

Weasley, George

Weasley, Ginny

Weasley, Molly

Weasley, Ron

Vance, Emmeline

That was twenty-seven people invited in total, which made this less of a secret, and more like a do-gooder convention. The only thing to be said from the unexpectedly large number was that at least there were enough Order members to offset the prevalence of a certain ginger family, and keep it from turning into a Weasley family reunion. The guests had arrived in prearranged Portkeys throughout the day, and Draco was wary of every single one of them, including himself. If Arabella Longbottom's iffy health had allowed her to be invited, he would even have been wary of her too. He managed to secure the list from Remus soon before the ceremony was due to start. The only real surprise had been Fleur, who had apparently been doing work with the Order, and had been approved as Bill's date. And Diggory, whom, after all, was Tonks's new prize protege.

As with Sirius's 'open sky' freedom party, Draco spent some time going over the list anyway, reviewing attendance, but the only missing faces were Dumbledore, Hagrid, and McGonagall. And he saw no one there but the names that should be. It let him at least relax somewhat, as he walked up with Harry, Hermione, Tonks, and Frank and Alice Longbottom, to take their places beneath the wedding arch and wait for the ceremony to begin.

Once all the guests were settled, Ginny and Luna came down the aisle first, as bid by Elphias Doge. Dumbledore had initially been meant to officiate, but in his absence, Doge had stepped up in a major way, eager to contribute to the Order in any way he could despite his fast-fading health. It was both very brave and very modern of him, to even be standing there, looking eccentric in his orange Houndstooth Muggle tuxedo, calling in the start of a gay wedding, but there he was. His bald head and stout build in that lurid orange pattern did not perhaps have the gravitas of Dumbledore, but he had some of his old friend's same quiet dignity, as he raised his hands and signaled for the flower girls to begin dropping their snowdrops.

They both looked beautiful, which filled Draco's heart with simultaneous pride and dismay. No surprise which sentiment attached to which girl. But there was something eerie to him in the sight of Ginny Weasley walking down the aisle in flowy white chiffon with a basket full of flowers, even as she tossed petals out before and beside her steps. Draco stole a look at

Harry, but Harry turned out to be looking at him, not at the flower girls. "Don't the girls look beautiful?" Draco hissed, testing him, and Harry just nodded, giving him a smile, and said something about how of course Draco's cousin was lovely, but not half as lovely as Draco.

There was no time for puerile jealousies, then, as Luna and Ginny went to their seats, with Ginny immediately congratulated by an already misty-eyed Molly Weasley, prime candidate to be sobbing before Sirius and Remus even finished their vows. Draco had attended a few weddings before, pureblooded affairs, and no one would have so much as cracked a smile, let alone shown such strong emotion at those. At the receptions after, perhaps, those were a different story, but at the ceremony itself? Those were far too solemn and important. But they were all in Muggle clothes to the very last of them, and Citadelle Xaphan with its long history of pureblooded weddings was about to witness something never seen before in its sun-drenched ruins.

Sirius and Remus walked up the aisle together, hand in hand, and with oohs and ahhs, a hush fell over the crowd. They made an unbelievably striking couple, with Sirius's dramatic good looks and long wavy dark hair, and Remus's earnest handsome face and adoring brown eyes fixed on Sirius as they walked, fingers entwined like they never wanted to let each other go. And they kept holding hands, even though their palms might be getting sweaty in the afternoon sun, as Doge nodded to them and began saying a formal welcome to the guests. Remus in his brilliant white suit had indeed passed Draco's rigid standards for approval, and he was glad to see Bill and Fleur surreptitiously taking photographs for them on wizarding cameras as the wedding began.

Doge finished a brief homily about the value of love as the strongest force against evil, by the end of which Mrs. Weasley outdid herself by starting to sob already. Bill and Delacour smiled at each other and held hands as Doge finished, and then the time came for Sirius and Remus to say their vows. According to Harry, given regular updates by the two-way mirror with Sirius, Remus had campaigned to either have him write both their vows, or else do standard ones from some text. Draco knew his parents had recited the standard, magically binding Malfoy vows. But Sirius had been resolute, and eventually, he had gotten permission to pen his own, albeit with a strict list of forbidden words and a 200 word limit. Harry had gotten a look at the forbidden word list, and told Draco it included a formidable number of names, spells, crimes, and obscenities, with the words pureblood and werewolf underlined at the top. Draco assumed Sirius would obey this list, but he couldn't be sure, which made it tenser to have Remus be the one to go first.

"Sirius," Remus began, not speaking from a card the way Hermione said some people did. Both Sirius and Remus had memorized their vows, although in Sirius's case, that might not necessarily be a good thing. Left him more open to spontaneous improvisation if he liked. But Remus was likely to stick to the script in his head, and it was a script that left Draco very proud to be Remus's best man.

"Sirius, when I say 'I will' to you today, this is what I promise."

Draco snuck a gaze over at Harry, who looked happier already than he had practically all year, but then he could look nowhere but Sirius, whose handsome face was almost painfully transfixed by the words Remus was speaking. "I promise to accept the past," Remus began,

not one to mince words, "To not hold your mistakes against you, and never give up on you again." With no cue card in his hands, he could take both of Sirius's hands in his, staring right into his eyes. "I promise we'll keep the memories of those we've lost alive between us. I promise to do my best to make James and Lily proud, with the future we build ourselves and our family."

Harry made a soft noise then which only Draco seemed to hear. Draco smiled over at him reassuringly, and Harry gave him a small nod, taking a visible deep breath, and then smiling again as Remus vowed, "I promise to make your family mine." Then came the portion truly a prerequisite, if pledging to do anything more lasting with Sirius Black than, say, adopt a hamster together. "I promise to keep your ego in check, to smooth your rough edges, to say when you're wrong, and hold you accountable, even when it's hard not to get distracted by how beautiful you are."

Draco's own face broke into a broad grin, surprised to hear that from Remus, and heard a surprised, gratified laugh from the audience. Remus's eyes went for a moment to Sirius's mouth, and Sirius bit his lip. There was a whole story then in the look between them, before Remus went on. "I promise to be honest, to show my weakness as well as my strength, and be faithful to the end. I promise to fight by your side, to share our burdens, and keep you warm in the cold." There it was, the inevitable reference to the war they were in, which Remus had softened the blow of by proceeding with a compliment. Sirius nodded intently at the reminder.

"I promise to be resilient through adversity, to hold you when you cry, and to protect you," Remus said with full conviction. When he said he would protect Sirius, Draco could almost believe him, that the past could be changed enough that they might just live through the war together. "I promise to stand before the world, from this day until my last, with no shame anymore," Remus said, and closed his eyes, summoning all his conviction, before he uttered, "I promise to never regret this choice, because I love you, Sirius, until the day I die. I promise."

Mrs. Weasley was openly sobbing by then, and she wasn't the only one. Draco looked from a spellbound Sirius to Harry, and Harry mouthed *I love you* at him. Draco felt a wave of guilt sweep over him, at the sight of the words he didn't have the courage to say. He smiled like he hadn't been able to read Harry's lips.

Then it was Sirius's turn, and Draco had to tense in anticipation of how unconventional he might be in contrast. But Harry was Sirius's best man, so it was on him if he failed to deliver. Whatever. It wasn't like Remus was going to leave him at the altar if his vows were a little wonky.

The start was not the most promising. "You know what keeps coming to my mind?" Sirius said casually, and not just Remus and Draco tensed. "What James said, when he first found out about us. You know what he told me?"

Knowing what Draco knew, he had a suspicion it might be profane. Remus looked curious, as if he didn't actually know. His face broke into a giddy and very young-looking smile as Sirius told him, "'This isn't just anyone. This is Remus. So you'd better not fuck this up.' And I did, and I probably will again, but I'm going to try, because you're *not* just anyone."

These vows really had to be an emotional roller coaster for Harry, with all of these references to his parents. They should have been up there as part of the wedding party, so many years ago, maybe with Harry as a baby or young child held by someone else in the audience. But at least Sirius and Remus had finally made it here, so many years later. And there was a Potter there to witness Sirius repeat those first words, as the mark of the beginning of a devotion that had never ended.

"There is no one else. There will never be anyone else. I'm going to put you before all others, even myself, because without you, I'm not myself," Sirius said, grabbing Remus's hands and squeezing them visibly tight, a furtive desperation in his gorgeous dark eyes. "I'm going to leave behind the bitterness of the past, the wasted years, the resentment, because the best thing that came out of Azkaban wasn't vengeance, it was love. For *you*."

A murmur went through the crowd, and the next sob that sounded was not Mrs. Weasley's, it was Hermione's. Draco looked over at her, noticed her for the first time, and wondered how long tears had been running down her face. He smiled at her, and she smiled back through her tears. Tonks put an arm around her shoulders.

"That never died in me there, even if the rest of me did," Sirius said with unusual seriousness, eyes unflinching on Remus's, not seeing a thing around them but them. "So I want to give you the world. To give you everything you deserve. Everything mine is yours."

Draco remembered Sirius's frustrations at Remus's resistance to sharing the Black fortune with him, and had to smirk inwardly. Way to get that part in there.

"I'm going to keep making you laugh, keep making you blush, and keep embarrassing you," Sirius went on. He laughed aloud as Remus rolled his eyes, leaning forward like he meant to steal a kiss before he remembered where they were. It was good Remus didn't, because knowing Draco's uncle, he'd probably manage to forget where he was in his vows before they were done.

"I'm going to bring you snowdrops every Valentine's Day, wherever we are," Sirius said, with astonishing confidence. "I'll find a way." When Sirius spoke with that much confidence, it was hard not to believe him. After all, he'd managed to get snowdrops to Remus when he was hiding out as a pet dog for Hagrid, secretly the fugitive Prisoner of Azkaban. Now he was a man restored, a walking miracle. Remus could not have looked more transfixed or more grateful for the miracle he had been given, as Sirius finished, "I'll follow wherever you lead me, wherever you want to go. And someday, Remus, I *will* be a good enough man to deserve you."

Doge waited, and then he beamed out at the audience. "First, I am required to ask anyone present who knows a reason why these persons may not lawfully marry, to declare it now."

Draco didn't know why he tensed the way he did. What did he expect, Aunt Bella to pop up from behind the battlements, screaming out *Toujours pur*? His fingers ran over the Liquid Fiendfyre vial in his pocket anyway, before enough of a silence had passed that it was clear no one meant to oppose the marriage. That was the cue for Ron and Neville to walk up the aisle together in their white suits, much to the pleasure of both respective sets of parents. Frank and Alice in particular could not have looked prouder beside Draco, as they watched

their son come up and deliver the ring for Sirius to Remus. Luna seemed to be craning her neck at the sight.

Sirius and Remus were using their engagement rings as the wedding bands, which Draco chose to take as a flattering testimony to his craftsmanship, rather than cheapness. He heaved an inward sigh of relief, as he saw that the inside of the black diamond he had made indeed said *Beloved of Remus* inside. It had been a risk, trusting *Ron and Neville* to give them the right rings.

"Remus," Doge began, "Will you take Sirius to be your husband? Will you love him, comfort him, honor and protect him, and, forsaking all others, be faithful to him as long as you both shall live?"

"I will," said Remus, and Draco's hand went out of his pocket, resolving not to be feeling at any kind of weapon at the most sacred moment. For his part, Sirius seemed to visibly relax, as if even after that, some part of him had still doubted that Remus would really hitch his wagon to such an unreliable ride. But he had said the words, and now he took Sirius's hand and slid on the ring, the snowdrop a spark like sunlight on the ocean as it slid into place.

"Sirius," Doge said, "Will you take Remus to be your husband? Will you love him, comfort him, honor and protect him, and, forsaking all others, be faithful to him as long as you both shall live?"

"I will," Sirius said, and Draco was relieved he hadn't said something like *Fuck yeah*, to judge the exuberance the words came out. After Sirius put Remus's ring on him, he seized both hands and kissed them excitedly, while Doge turned to the audience again. Draco didn't know why, until he added a part that would never be in any traditional pureblood wedding.

"Will you, the families and friends of Sirius and Remus, support and uphold them in their marriage now and in the years to come?"

"We will," Draco said faithfully with the others, a bit stunned to have been included, but no one else looked surprised by it. And that seemed to be that, with no solemn imprecations courtesy of any gods to strike the involved parties infertile should they be unfaithful. Somehow, there were no blood pacts or veiled threats at all, before Doge simply said,

"I now pronounce you married. You may kiss."

The applause was thunderous as Sirius and Remus kissed, Sirius lingering so inappropriately long that Remus had to pry himself away, with a laughing, helplessly adoring smile.

Fred and George might have a future ahead of them as DJs after all, that was, if George's ear and Fred's life had a future. Although their music selection at the reception that night could only be called eclectic, spanning between wizarding and Muggle with a fair number of songs only they would have played at a party at a deserted castle island with their parents and all their parents' friends- Draco could have lived a long, happy life without watching Arabella Figg and Elphias Doge bust a rug together to some raving Muggle claiming he was *too sexy*

for his shirt- the most important track was the one for Sirius and Remus's first dance, and there, they acquitted themselves admirably. Some treacly love song set the perfect mood, and Sirius put all of the time he had spent in long pureblood etiquette classes to good use, leading a more hesitant Remus all about the open-air dance floor. They set up a rhythm soon enough, and the tenseness in Remus's shoulders gradually faded away, two handsome figures all in white, with the sea breeze blowing through past them like a benediction.

They waltzed through a sea of hanging golden fairy lights, right on the open grass, with the weather still cooperating as sunset began to assert itself overhead: another bath of golden light over their dreamy movement, sliding in tandem, as if drawing in and out of another world with each step, the world only they saw together. There seemed the same feeling of tunnel vision between them, like the world grew further and further away until it was only them, being watched from beginning to end in reverent silence.

Then finally, the next speedy song came on, imploring all of the 'fellas' to *bust a move*, and that was everyone's cue to join them. Draco pulled Luna with them, and he indeed attempted to bust said move, being familiar with this American rap music from his Muggle Studies OWL preparation. Luna was not so familiar, but she acquitted herself admirably, with her unique whimsical moves. Not caring what anyone thought of her was a distinct advantage on the dance floor, at least for her own enjoyment.

They'd already had a truly delicious wedding dinner, courtesy of a week of preparation by Mrs. Weasley with many forced helpers, including a sullen Kreacher. Draco was well-fed, but not well-soused, as his guardians had learned too well about his proclivity to steal champagne and had cast anti-underage drinking charms. But he and the other students had a fine time nonetheless, alternating between hanging out and shooting the shit, dancing, and going back to the tent and stealing leftover bits of hors d'oeuvres and cake. Draco alternated between dancing in groups, and dancing with Hermione, Luna, or both. When Harry came over and asked him to dance, though, Draco just gave him a dubious look.

"Are you serious?" Draco sighed. "Listen, that's a slow song. If you want to wait until a faster song, we can dance with a group of people-"

"No, I want to dance a slow song with you," Harry insisted, with the growing dusk catching behind him like a diffused halo of blue. It was surreal how handsome he looked, his gleaming white suit still completely unsullied, every bit the figure of the Prince Charming even with glasses and messy hair, every bit the hero. It didn't actually make it any harder to turn him down. The last thing Draco wanted was to ruin the wedding by making a scene. Unless he was needed to, should Luna's still-pending attempt to dance with Neville backfire.

"Harry," Draco said shortly, "Not gonna happen. You know how I feel about public displays of affection-"

"Oh, but it's fine when you wanna make out behind a statue or something," Harry hissed, and Draco glanced around to see who might have heard them. There were way too many members of the Order of the Phoenix here to go spreading that around.

"Exactly," Draco said dryly, "*Behind* a statue. Listen, Harry, if you want to hang out alone later, when we're back at Grimmauld-"

That must have been the wrong thing to say, because Harry's temper was suddenly as hair-trigger as it had been at the very start of the year, when he first arrived at Grimmauld with a Patronus to the face. He turned on his heel and stalked off towards the tent without a word.

Draco decided to let sleeping dogs lie, at least for the moment. He turned his attention to Luna, who was sitting alone watching the dancers, and caught her eye. She was staring at where Neville was dancing in a pack with a great number of Weasleys, indeed looking to have grown more graceful on his feet than Draco would have thought, as well as better-built in his suit. But Draco wasn't biased to think no one could hold a candle to Luna in her ethereal, flowing white dress, save maybe Hermione. He considered, then cast a soft Diffindo, severing one of the strings of snowdrops along the edge of the dance floor, and wove it into a flower crown for her hair. Her eyes widened as he brought it over, like she already knew its price.

"Luna," Draco said, taking on the same tones as he had used as Slytherin Quidditch captain. "I know what you want to do. Now are you going to do it while you still have the chance, or are you just going to sit here like a fucking coward?"

Luna blinked up at him guilelessly. "I haven't decided yet."

Draco bit off a frustrated sigh. "I made this for you. Do you want it or not?" Luna shrugged, and Draco considered, then cast Pyritaverum to turn the vines around the snowdrops golden. "Aurulaquerum," Draco cast after, making the gold on them shimmer in the falling light, and Luna stared at it more admiringly. "Listen, Luna, do you really think he can say no with this on your head? You're royalty now," he declared, and lay it on her lovely braided crown of light hair. She adjusted it shyly, and then the Sleeping Beauty pendant around her neck, staring up at him with a fragile sort of courage growing on her face.

"Okay," Luna said, taking a deep breath. "Okay, I'll ask him to dance." She strode off towards Neville, only to falter just as a slow song began. It didn't sound like the last song had fully played out. Draco didn't put it past Fred and George to have noticed the impending drama and changed it mid-song, the cheeky bastards. But she spurred her step on nonetheless, and as Neville made to move off the dance floor, she sidled up and tapped him on the shoulder.

The music was blaring too loud for Draco to hear them, but he could see the way Neville's face lit up, a gorgeous smile animating his face as he nodded excitedly. Then Neville had taken Luna by the waist and was leading her over the floor in a very graceful waltz, just as accomplished a dancer as Luna had claimed. From a distance, Draco might almost have had misgivings, watching his precious cousin whisked up in the arms of a tall, dark-haired fifth-year, like Tom Riddle had been. But he was close enough to make out that it was Neville throughout, and that calmed him. No one had a better heart than Neville Longbottom, except for maybe Luna herself. He could entrust Luna's heart to Neville. Draco definitely could if Neville made her smile like that, her giggle ringing out into the sea air as he dipped her.

Then Draco heard another laugh, just as girlish and thrilled, and familiar as well, but not calculated to warm the heart. It chilled it where he sat, even before he looked over and saw that yes, it belonged to Ginny Weasley, and she was being spun in the arms of-

Of Harry Potter, finishing the turn with an awkward, adorable smile. Ginny practically bounced where she stood, beaming up at him, before he led her further along the dance floor. She was saying something as her arms tightened around his neck, staring up at him with stars in her eyes. She was shorter than him, but not by much, which made them look the perfect heterosexual couple, even more than they did already, earnest good-looking athletic Gryffindors in matching white.

When Harry spun her again, her long loose straight red hair swung in a wave of fire, brilliant in the dimming light. It must remind Harry of his mother's.

Draco tried to look over at Luna and Neville, but everything there looked in order, as expected. Neville was thrilled to be asked to dance by the girl he liked, Luna was thrilled to be accepted, and in the moment, nothing for them was more complicated than that, no more complicated than it looked for Harry and Ginny.

They looked like they belonged together.

Ron and Hermione were dancing together in their vicinity, with their hands less firmly on each other's bodies, Ron's arms linked tentatively behind Hermione on the air rather than holding her waist. It was an objectively fascinating development, but Draco couldn't bring himself to summon up an ounce of interest in that either, not even his beloved Cannon- no, not Striker either, his best friend in the world, when just beside them, Harry was dancing with-

With the girl he was probably going to marry. Maybe even here, in not too many years. She could wear a dress like that in white, just longer. Harry could wear the same suit, even. He'd just need it altered some. He still had some growing to do. Maybe if Draco survived that long, he would be expected to do the tailoring charms for him-

Draco got up, turned on his heel, and walked away. He let his steps take him where they wanted, and where they wanted seemed to be inside the castle, where the coming arrival of night made the broken towers cast long enough shadows that he could retreat unseen. He felt crumbling stone under his feet with every few steps, in between his expensive leather shoes sinking into mud and murk and green, cracking cobblestone or fallen rubble. But he kept walking, until the sound of the distant music and revelry was softer than the impact of his vicious feet on the weak stone.

Except the sound was too loud, and too uneven. Draco realized in time, even through his mind falling apart on him, that there were two sets of footsteps. He whirled around in the empty courtyard he had found himself, drawing his wand. When it was Harry following him in, Draco didn't lower his wand.

It looked to be the ruins of a library, with rotting books on collapsed shelves behind him. Harry's feet trod the same path as Draco's, over the wreck of ancient knowledge, the bottom of his pristine white trousers now smeared in dirt and dust like Draco's likely were. It had been a very long time, it seemed, since anyone had set foot *inside* Citadelle Xaphan, or at least this deep.

"Draco!" Harry yelled, only to stop when he saw Draco was there waiting with his wand. "What is that for?"

"Nothing," Draco said, and pocketed it.

"Damn it, Draco, I thought something was wrong!" Harry yelled, with none of the happiness he had shown before dancing with Ginny still intact. "I thought you'd seen something and were going after your aunt or something! Don't just go off like that, you scared me to death-"

Draco shifted, trying to find a secure place to stand that did not have rotting parchment or twisted vines beneath it. "I'm not allowed to go for a walk? Get over yourself."

Harry had to hear the acidity in Draco's tone, unusually genuine in its venom. "What are you doing? Why are you going off like this in the middle of the party?"

Draco was not going to let him see he was jealous. If he had to lose Harry, the least he could was not give Harry the satisfaction of seeing Draco was at all fussed about it.

Except he heard himself snap, "What do you care? Go dance with your new girlfriend!"

"What?" Harry said blankly, seeming to search his mind for who he had just been dancing with. "What do you mean... Ginny? Ginny Weasley?"

"No need to add the *Weasley*," Draco scoffed, fingers stroking at his wand in his pocket. "I'm well aware of what family she belongs to. And if you marry her, you marry into that family. You get Ron as a brother-in-law, and the Weasleys as new parents. Just like you've always wanted-"

Harry took a step closer, a bit of rubble crumbling completely to chalky dust beneath his shoe. "Do you have any idea how delusional you sound right now? Making up stories about me and Ginny?"

Oh, *Draco* was delusional? His temper was shot instantly, self-control deserting him more rapidly than dusk was falling. "She *likes* you, you stupid-"

"Not anymore," Harry tried to say, and Draco laughed contemptuously.

"You buy that?" Draco sneered. *I know the* future*, you hypocrite, I know what you want, what you really love, and I sure as hell know what* she *does.* "She'd like you again the first chance she got-"

Some sort of understanding seemed to set in to Harry's wide, baffled eyes. "Is that why you're so much colder to Ginny than the other Weasleys? Why she's so low on your- your *Weasley* ranking? Just because she had a crush on me when we were little?" Draco crossed his arms, and Harry stalked up to stand as close to him as he seemed to dare, breath not quite palpable on his face but it was close. "I asked you to dance first! I would have danced with you if you let me! All night! Why are you the one acting jealous, when you're wearing the necklace Nott gave you-"

Draco looked down, and sure enough, his furious retreat through the castle ruins had dislodged the black opal necklace from beneath his suit, and had it hanging like a vial of poison between them. "There's protective charms on it, genius," Draco drawled, hiding his surprise with a veneer of superiority. "In case the wedding gets attacked. My godfather *did* mention-"

"Why wouldn't you want Luna to have it, then?" Harry interrupted. "You'd never take back something that would keep her safe-"

"The charms are specific to me!"

"That's convenient," Harry sighed, and Draco wasn't that far from drawing his wand again. The unmitigated gall, to try and turn around his fucking heartbreak on *him*-

"You didn't have to stand there and watch *me* dance with *him*-"

"No, I've just had to watch you play Quidditch with him all year-"

Draco felt tears threaten at the back of his eyes. He could feel his body starting to grow colder. "Why did you follow me if you were just going to yell at me and be a prick-"

"Because there's no reason for you to be jealous!" Harry shouted, also yelling now. It was lucky they were this deep in the castle. No one would hear what seemed likely to turn into a historic fight, and maybe even a break-up, for something that had never been truly formed at all. "You know how *I* feel about *you*-"

"And what, *you* don't?" Draco filled in. It had begun to mist around them, and now it began to rain, but Draco was too angrily to properly feel it, as the world around them went colder.

"That's right, I don't!" Harry yelled. "I'd tell everyone at this wedding about us if I could!" How had this escalated so quickly? "I'd tell the whole school. I'd take out an ad in the Daily Prophet if you wanted, and you still get mad when I dance with a girl who has literally no one but her brothers to dance with- I was being *nice*- not that I should have to explain myself to you-"

"You're overselling the indignation a little," Draco sneered, wrapping his arms around himself as raindrops pattered down like hail, and Harry seemed to snap.

"I LOVE YOU!" he yelled, as if it was the worst kind of insult. In a voice like it was the fourth Unforgivable curse, or at least it felt that way to him. "You can make that *face*, Draco, but it doesn't change that I'm in love with you! I've never even had a *crush* on anyone but you- it's just always been you, and I wish it wasn't, but it is, even if you're never going to say the words back-"

"You want me to," Draco filled in dully. "Obviously."

"Of course I do!" Harry exclaimed, green eyes looking close to tears of his own behind his wet glasses, so frustrated Draco could smell his magic in the air even more keenly than usual,

sharper than the salt from the ocean, and the sudden monsoon fall of the rain. "Do you have any idea how it feels being the only one who even acts like they care-"

"That's not true and you know it," Draco tried to interrupt, but Harry was relentless against the rain and cold.

"How do you feel about me, then? How?" Harry demanded, and Merlin, Draco should have listened to Hermione in January. Hermione was always right.

"Harry," Draco sighed, with no idea what in the world to say. Harry's gaze darkened, a despair setting in that looked like once it fell, there was nothing Draco could ever do to shake it. There was a pulling at the edges that Draco could feel in himself, a thinning-

"Do you love me?" Harry asked, voice shaking and going very small, cracking on the final word. He sounded a bit like he had as a child, in that memory, the first time he had been locked in the cupboard. He took a deep, shuddering breath, hands fists at his sides, staring at Draco with a pleading still in front of the despair, but a pleading which seemed on some level to know he wouldn't get the answer he wanted. And he didn't.

"Harry, I can't," Draco began, and then there was a soft crack of Apparition. He frowned, stepping back, and Harry pursued him. "Harry, did you hear that?"

"What are you talking about? Don't change the subject," Harry protested, but Draco was looking around, trying to figure out where the crack he'd heard had come from. Was he just so paranoid he was going crazy? Did his subconscious think some grand attack would be preferable to facing up to Harry Potter asking if he loved him? He couldn't hear anything else, couldn't see anyone as nearby as they should be, from the single snap in the air being that audible over the slap of rain and the perpetual low hum of the ocean far below, thunder cracking with an arriving storm-

Until Draco walked back and tilted his head back enough to look up into the rainfall. There were towers all over the citadel, but the tallest one was near the ruins of the library where they'd stumbled into: the library tower, Sirius had told him during the brief tour. It did look the tallest, and more intact compared to many others, although with none of the hanging gargoyles near it that graced the others. Plain but looming, like a single strike of ink across a page, it looked like the kind of place that could be full of more sinister old tomes rotting up to the rafters. It was a tower that in a citadel for a different family might have worked as the lighthouse, shining a beacon down for travelers, who the storm would have fleeing to any safe harbors. But there was no beacon in the steep slender pillar of it, cutting through the rolling in of dark clouds across the sky, not even at the top-

There was a woman at the top of the tower. A woman in black, hooded against the rain.

"Harry!" Draco cried out, grabbing his arm, but just like when Harry got too wound up at Draco to see the Snitch beside him, he didn't look up, just at Draco.

"Do you love me?"

Draco almost fell to his knees where he stood at the sight of the tall slender figure, with the tightness in his lungs and the clamminess of skin tripling in a second. He knew it a woman, and not just because of the willowy curve of the body beneath the flowing black robes. He didn't know why he was so certain, until he realized the familiar feeling of the magic, and the dreadful déjà vu surety of the recognition where he had felt it before, where he had seen this figure before: Malfoy Manor.

"Aunt Bella," Draco breathed, too soft for Harry to hear him.

She shouldn't be here, she shouldn't have been able to get in, but she *had*, and he had to-

When Harry touched his arm, he wrenched away from him, running towards the tower-

And yet he found himself suspended in time, seeing what was coming but always just a moment too late. The woman stood there at the top of the library tower at the last embers of dusk, a deep black silhouette with her robes flowing behind her in the night wind from the ocean, shadow against the deepening midnight blue of the sky, the moon already out in its crescent to hang right behind her, the barest sliver of light. But then there was light as she raised out her wand, and called out in a voice as familiar as the back of his hand, "PIERTORTUM LOCOMOTOR!"

There was the sound of cracking and breaking all around, all at once, from the gargoyles and statues on the walls and towers above them, obsidian wrenching violently away from crumbling stone. Dark wings took to the air, with the bellows in the hands of the gargoyles already alight with waiting fire, bellows flashing as they worked, advancing out past the castle towards the tents and lights towards a wedding that erupted with screams and crashes and then flames, even in the deluge gone quickly alight. Draco could only stare helplessly at that sparking orange overhead of more and more gargoyles coming to life and flying, before it was dust blocking out all light from the sky, the impact of the statues taking flight to defend the castle sending the castle itself falling-

"Harry!" Draco screamed, but it was too late. The library tower stood intact, with the woman's wand over her head blazing like a brand on the sky, but the nearest tower came crashing down on them both, a rain of stone over their heads sending them falling to the ground-

Sending *Harry* falling. A shield sprang up around Draco, without his wand even having to make it out of his pocket. The opal pendant floated before him in the soot-blackened air, glowing a mottled green, and held back the fall of the rubble, while Harry was battered underneath it.

Disasters, Draco dully remembered hearing Theo say. He drew the talon wand, which he could feel pulsing madly under his hand, like it was ready to kill at once. He raised his own shield, and the rubble crashed all around him in a circle, while he remained untouched.

Draco ran forward, trying to see where in the piles of stone Harry had been felled, and he could make out a small figure in luminous white, unmoving beneath rock and ash-

"MORSMODRE!" the woman screamed, and her brand in the sky turned green.

The Dark Mark surged up into the sky, Slytherin-green between the clouds, and in the distance, very distant, Draco heard louder screams. Draco's legs trembled, wand nearly dropping out of his hand, but then he ran forward. He could see the rain itself glowing the Dark Mark's acid green in the air before him, getting colder and colder, and Draco knew this feeling. This had never happened before, and yet he felt he had been right here before- had felt exactly this in months in a bleak island in a barren cell-

The Mark had been a signal. Its fearsome coil was hardly visible for long before the cold, which had been hissing at Draco's bones since he stepped into the courtyard, materialized in the form of darker clouds. No, not clouds but shadows, swimming in front of the moon and all of whatever remained of the stars. The gargoyles were no longer alone, as sleeker sweeping figures filled the space between them, robes flapping in tatters around them.

Their cold made Harry's body, not unconscious but just dazed, begin to convulse uncontrollably. Reaching him became a matter of survival, leaping over a gap in the cobblestone only to fall, face crashing down into the swampier and swampier muck while the very green of the overgrowth became black with the blot overheard of shadow. Shadows swooping in from above, so many they nearly cast the whole world around into pitch-black save for that lingering emerald glow behind them and the sheen of the frantic rain over broken stone...

From above Citadelle Xaphan, the Dementors descended.

The Library Tower

Chapter Notes

Playlist

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

The Antipodean Opaleye sprung out of Draco's wand fully-formed and ready, sweeping out instantly to soar at the Dementors that were circling around Harry. Draco watched Astaroth fly with the feeling of a nightmare, unable to believe something so terrible had really happened, before he moved his leaden feet again, breath short but still moving. He raced towards Harry, ready to get him to safety away from the Dementors if it was the last thing he did.

The dragon was as brilliant as any Patronus that Draco had ever seen. Remus had done a good job teaching him in the end- if Remus was even still alive, if he was going to survive this night, him or Sirius- but Draco couldn't afford to think of anyone but Harry, who had Dementors crouched over him still-

But Astaroth drove them off, the light that he radiated so perfect a silver-blue that no Dementor seemed able to withstand the purity of his glow. Draco felt a brief ray of something almost like hope, when it seemed the world had neatly splintered in two, at the sight of his dragon with that opaline sheen roaring protectively over his Harry, keeping the darkness at bay.

The entire clearing emptied of Dementors, flying off to threaten the wedding. But Harry had taught the students Patronuses, so they would know them, let alone the members of the Order- Remus had a Patronus, so did Tonks, probably most of the others, and they would be driving them back- though there were the gargoyles- Aunt Bella shouldn't have been able to do that, Draco's blasting of her name from the tapestry really had been useless-

Except one Dementor wasn't fleeing, and then Draco saw it wasn't a Dementor. The hooded figure had pale hands, not scaly gray ones, as he bent over Harry's helpless figure.

"Harry!" Draco screamed, and the hooded man looked up.

He was not a Dementor. He was something much worse. He was Draco's father.

To his credit, Draco didn't stop running at the sight of that face so much like his own. But it didn't matter. Father seized Harry's arm, dragged him up, and Apparated out of the castle with Harry, without a word.

Draco screamed, falling and tripping once more on the uneven ground. He was lucky the Dementors had left the radius, because the dragon had dissipated, and Draco's knees spasmed at how hard they hit the stone. These cobblestones just had to be firm, and sharp, and one of his nails broke jagged and the wound filled with dirt as his hands dragged over the path-

The path. There were two paths. One was back towards all of the Dementors and fire and screaming, towards the wedding, towards his friends, towards Sirius and Remus, people he had to protect, people he could tell what happened, people who could help him find Harry and save him before it was too late, before Father delivered Harry to the Dark Lord. The other was the exact opposite direction, towards the library tower, towards Aunt Bella-

He was running before he even thought of it towards the tower, the talon wand drawn in his right hand hand. His dagger followed a second later in his left. If his wand didn't work, if it rebelled against him in her favor, he was not unarmed. And he had liquid Fiendfyre in his pocket as well. He would have little compunctions against loosing it on the top of the tower, and letting every last ancient book of House Black burn. The world was already on fire.

There didn't seem to be a door intact in all the citadel, not after the impact blast of all the stones falling from Piertotum Locomotor. The stairs up the tower barely seemed to hold together either, one long slender spiral staircase upwards, past floors with only small rooms or holes for windows to peer out, which only showed flashes of shadow and fire. With the Dementors descended on the wedding guests, the green of the Dark Mark against the sky was visible again...

Draco heard himself panting, but he didn't feel out of breath. He felt out of body, with none of the pain in the places he had fallen and cut himself registering anymore.

His only thought was *I'm going to kill her.* There was no room in him for any other feeling. It sent him running thudding up the stairs. It might be hard to make out over the chaos and roar of thunder, or it might not be, but let her hear if she liked. He was going to cut her open with his wand or his knife or both. He was going to end this with hands covered in her blood, or he was going to set them both on fire. He was going to die in Fiendfyre like he should have those years ago with Vince. He was going to take Bellatrix Lestrange with him. He was going to take this to its natural course of blood or blaze, shadowplay exhausted as the masquerade came to a close-

At the top of the library tower.

There was no door to the roof either. Draco ran out onto the flat black stone, only shallow crenelations between him and a steep wet drop, but his feet for once were sure as he caught sight of the black-robed frame: crouched down in a heap, gasping for breath, a woman's gasps.

Draco lifted the talon wand. "Sectum-"

The woman turned, her hood falling away. Her hair was not dark, not even under the torrent of rain. It was as blonde as Draco's own.

Draco managed not to drop either his wand or the dagger. But the spell died on Draco's lips. "Mother?" he gasped, and Narcissa Malfoy raised her exhausted face, pale but triumphant.

"Draco," she panted, and peered up at him blearily through the rain. Her wand was there at her side, resting with her limp, delicate white hand in a pool of water. But she didn't reach for it, just breathed, "My son-"

"Expelliarmus!" Draco yelled, and her wand flew into his grasp. He pushed it in his pocket, then advanced on her, wand and knife still drawn. "Where is she, Mother? Where's Aunt Bella?"

"Bella?" Mother said, blinking rapidly. "She isn't... she isn't here, Draco..."

"I saw her!" Draco screamed, shaking with impotent rage. "I saw her, and I'm going to kill her! You can't save her! Tell me where she is!"

"Draco," Mother said, face turning upwards, tone almost pitying, her long white-blond hair loose and weighed down by the water like a shackle against the stone. "She was never here."

"She cast the spell! I heard her voice! She brought the gargoyles to life! The Dark Mark!"

"Sweetheart," Mother said, pushing her hair out her eyes with her branded palm, "Your aunt couldn't have done those things. She wanted to. But she can't penetrate the House Black wards anymore, let alone bring them down. Nor will the castle respond to her. You blasted her from the Black tapestry..."

Draco understood, and then he wanted to throw himself from the tower. "You did this," he said, tasting bile. "You're on the tapestry, still- I didn't take *your* name away or Father's- you took down the wards and got him in to take Harry, and you set those monsters on my friends-"

"Draco, they are not your friends," Mother said quietly, finally pulling herself up to sit. He could see her beautiful hands trembling, the lovely emerald rings shaking sparks of green that reflected the green of the Dark Mark she had cast. The effort of the dark magic seemed to have exhausted her elegant, fragile frame, much as Draco was sometimes felled by magical exhaustion. "*We* are your family, Draco. And this is your chance to be with us again."

"Are you mad?" Draco screamed, wand right over her, as she smiled up gently but sadly. So weak and pale, her resemblance to Luna was what struck him. She looked like Luna had on the floor of the Chamber of Secrets, most all the life drained from her, an evil man's victim. Except she had been the one to cause this, to bring down hellfire upon them. "Father took Harry! I love him!"

Mother's face didn't change. "You don't," she said simply. "You're a child, Draco, and this is a childish infatuation, but it will fade. Because you're a Malfoy. You're a *Black*. Look at your wand. *It* knows what you are. Come back to us, Draco-"

"How did you do this?" Draco demanded, unable to stand her appeal to him, by all appearances in earnest, while everything Draco loved was falling beneath them. "How did

you even know it would be here-"

"Bella was sure Sirius would want it to be here," Mother said, with no fear in her voice to speak her sister's name. "One last way to stick it to Orion Black. It sounded like Sirius. And he must not have thought we knew where the Unplottable citadel was- Bella didn't even know- but I did. Because I lied to everyone, even your father, when we were to be married. I told him I didn't know where it was, but really, Uncle Orion brought me here to see this on my eighteenth birthday. He gave me access to it. Orion always favored me, even over his own children-"

"Why?" Draco demanded, mind threatening to shut down under the sheer weight of his miscalculation, of everything he'd done wrong, and everything that everyone would have to suffer because of it. "Why would you lie about that?"

Mother smiled sadly. "Oh, Draco, look around us," she said, and gestured to the ruins below them in the storm. "I didn't want your father to see this place, not in such a disgraceful state. He never would have seen me the same-"

"Did Father make you do this?" Draco demanded, desperate for any excuse, any explanation.

"No," Mother said steadily. "No, Draco, when we figured out that Bella couldn't, I volunteered."

"The Dark Mark?" Draco asked fearfully. "Is someone dead- you wouldn't be part of that-"

"No, that was the signal that I'd taken down the wards. The signal to send the Dementors in from the sea. This was my choice, Draco. I wanted to."

Draco couldn't understand. Mother had never entered combat willingly in the blue loop. It wasn't *proper*, and she had wanted to stay alive to keep Draco safe as her first priority. Father had always tried so hard too, to keep her out of the line of fire. She'd never even taken the Dark Mark. Had she now? She had *cast* it. He could grab her, pull down her left sleeve if he liked to see. She was in no state to stop him. But he did not have it in him to look. "I don't believe you. Father's forcing you to. You did this because you're afraid of him, you've always done whatever he said because you're afraid of him and your sister-"

"Draco, I did this to see you again," Mother said, with the light of truth in her sweet, adoring gray eyes. "To get you away from these awful people, to take you *home.* We need to speak with you, Draco, there's something you need to know about your wand. Bella knows the story... she's never told it all to me, and I didn't know, but the way she explained it, Draco, she said *Dantanian Noir*-"

Draco stared back at her mutely, at once murderous and almost bored.

"*Dantanian*, Draco!" she said, as if she expected him to know the word. "She told me that whatever you've been given will be taken back, and *more*... I didn't understand, but she'll tell you everything if you come back. She'll keep the wand from ruining you, she *will.* We can *save* you, Draco, from that wand, from those people- I had hoped I would find you in all the

chaos, and look, you found *me*. Like it was fate! Because it's not too late. You can still make amends with Bella, still be forgiven by the Dark Lord-"

"Did you get my letters?" Draco interrupted. "Any letters? I wanted *you* to change sides-"

Narcissa stared up at him, then swept her blonde hair back from her face. Hanging in her ears was a twin pair of earrings, golden with the sigil of House Black hanging in black and green diamonds from the frames. He had sent them to her at the start of the year.

"Mother," Draco said, voice cracking. "Mother, no. Please don't make me do this, Mother. I don't want to. I don't want to hurt you."

"Why would you hurt me?" Mother asked in perfect ignorance.

Draco's hand tightened on his wand. "Where is Father taking Harry?"

He expected her to deny knowing like he might have in her shoes, but she just rested her chin on her hand, looking half-dead with her weariness now. Every instinct in Draco told him to help her, to support her tired body, to get her to safety. This was his *mother.* But she was saying, "I can't tell you, Draco. You know that."

Draco went cold.

He felt the talon wand as a part of his hand without even casting a thing, hatred like he had never felt for his mother surging, right alongside the forlorn urge to protect her. "Tell me," Draco said evenly, "Or I'll hurt you. There's no time. I'll do it."

"You won't," Mother said, and clasped her hands together serenely. "I know you, Draco. You're not capable of that. You won't hurt-"

"Cauterizo!" Draco yelled, and his mother's hand burned.

She screamed her son's name as she clasped at her burning hand, the talon brand turning from an inert dark red to a brilliant white-gold in the storm. He could hear the sound of searing. Before he drew his wand away, he could smell her flesh burning like a new brand. His delicate, refined, elegant mother sobbed out with pain. It seemed excruciating, her already weak frame convulsing with sheer agony like he had cast the Cruciatus curse on her.

But it was all her hand. She clutched at her wrist like she wanted to claw it off sooner than suffer the pain it was giving her a second longer. He could see from her grasping that her sleeve had come up. Her skin was unbranded by the Dark Mark. Draco's mark was the only one on his mother.

"Tell me where Harry is," Draco said without emotion in his voice, "Or I will do that, again and again, until your hand is burned off your wrist."

"Draco, please," she begged, and the part of Draco that should have shown mercy seemed almost powerless in him. If it was still there, it was very far away. The talon wand sparked with power at the tips of his fingertips, eager to cast the spell again. His own tiredness,

physically and magically, seemed cut in half by a surge of returning energy from the spell, the undeniable rush of it. "Draco, please, I can't..."

"Cauterizo!" Draco yelled.

Mother began to sob, trying to cover the brand and then drawing her other hand back at the heat on it, shoulders wracking, and Draco cast Cauterizo for a third time. She collapsed to the wet stone again, and there was a sizzling as her palm hit it, like it really might be cauterized off. "Don't make me," Draco said unsteadily. "Tell me where Harry is and this stops. Otherwise, it doesn't."

"I... I can't," she groaned. Draco's body felt shot through with power, like the lightning around them had struck them both, and made the top of the tower ready to collapse from the surge of energy there as for a fourth time, he cast Cauterizo on his mother's hand.

There was some part of Draco that was still telling him to stop, that this was something he couldn't come back from. But it was too small a voice to matter. If Mother had been Bellatrix, he would have killed her. He almost had, before he realized who it was. She was lucky he wasn't casting the Cruciatus- wasn't casting the Killing curse for what she'd *done*...

"Ready to tell me?" he hissed, and she stared up at him with her face changed, eyes swollen, almost ghoul-like. He had never seen her look so broken. It filled him with hope she would talk. "I'm not going to show you mercy-"

"The Department of Mysteries," she gasped, and buried her face in her hands. He could hear her tears along with sweat and rain searing against her burning brand, metallic in the air mixed with her expensive perfume. "At the Ministry."

Draco stared at her in incomprehension, thinking she was mocking him. "Because- because I want to be an Unspeakable?"

"No, there's a... a prophecy," she groaned, clawing at her wrist again as the lingering pain seemed to reverberate through still. "About Potter and the Dark Lord. It's your father's mission... to retrieve it..."

"Nagini's attack on Arthur Weasley," Draco said suddenly, and she nodded tightly, though he could see her eyes go that much bleaker, at that unequivocal sign of knowledge that showed how much he was on the other side.

"He'll take him there to retrieve it," Mother panted, "And then... then..." She seemed to be running out of steam, as she threatened to fade out of consciousness. But at his wordless growl, her eyes shot wide open again in unmistakable terror, of him. "Potter has to be the one to take it out- someone that it's about- and once he's gotten the prophecy, then-"

"Then what?" Draco demanded, brandishing the knife closer as well as his wand.

"Then he'll give him to the Dark Lord," she gasped. With her great effort finished, she let her head drop and shut her eyes. "Draco, this wand... it's changed you. This isn't you... you wouldn't have... not my baby... not my funny, clever little son..."

"You never protected me from Father," Draco blurted, and her eyes opened, the awful knowledge passing between their faces that had always looked so alike, equally fragile no matter who held the wand. "Never, not once. You never protected me from him..."

She didn't apologize. She just looked at him squarely, as if knowing he would have to run to save Harry anyway. Draco had a surge of spite in him so strong, another curse almost ripped out of his lips. "I could hurt you worse. Maybe I should."

"You... you won't," she said, with eyes not quite so certain as before. Her palm was smoking. In the distance, he could hear clashing, though the sound had been faded from his notice for so long.

"Incarcerous!" Draco cast, and at the last second, he made sure the rope meant to go around her neck cuffed her wrists twice instead.

"Draco, if the Order of the Phoenix wins, they'll... they'll catch me, I'll go to Azkaban- or I could get caught in the crossfire here sooner- if the tower falls-"

"Then let it fall," Draco spat.

Those were his last words. Or they should have been.

"If the tower falls," she repeated, lifting her bound wrists to gesture towards her bound ankles, pleading.

Draco stared at her for a hopeless moment, then gasped out Relashio and freed her feet.

But he was not finished. With the delicate touch she had taught him for removing her jewelry for her after galas, he took the Black sigil earrings out of her ears, pocketing them beside her wand. "I'm giving these to Luna," he said, before he left her and ran down the steps of the library tower.

When he emerged, he heard a girl's voice calling, a voice that made him want to sob in relief, even if the worst was surely yet to come. "Frankenstein! Frankenstein, is that you?" Hermione called, and he raced through the rain, to fling himself on her like he had just crawled up out of hell and her face was proof he was alive.

"I love you, Hermione," he gasped, and her eyes when they went to his were unsettled.

"What happened on that tower?" she asked, and he shook his head.

"There's no time. They took Harry- I saw them Apparate out, he's at the Ministry, the Department of Mysteries, I know the way in, I'll Side-Along you- tell me if I'm being too reckless, Hermione- tell me if I'm wrong and I'll do what you want-"

"No," Hermione said steadily, "We have to save Harry," and Draco nodded, before a flash of light hair caught his eye-

"*COUSIN*!"

Luna caught up, ran forward, and hugged them both. Draco ignored the eerie, ghostly, guilty feeling that swam through his gut at the sight of her matted, heavy, waterlogged blonde hair, so much like his mother's. There would be time for self-doubt later, but not now. Now, they had to fight.

Ron was right behind her, asking him if he was alright, with Fred, George, Ginny, and Neville beside him. "Harry told us he was going after you before- and when we saw the Dementors, I got Dumbledore's Army, and we went into the castle, but the gargoyles-"

"They have Harry, he's at the Department of Mysteries," Draco said, and explained as quickly as he could.

"Shouldn't we get the Order-" Neville began, and Draco shook his head.

"We have to go *now*," Draco ordered. "After they get the prophecy, they're giving him to the Dark Lord. Neville, go- find your parents, find Sirius and Remus, tell them where we're going, tell them to come if they can-"

Neville's big brown eyes widened in horror. "I can't let you all go off to fight for your lives without me-"

"Fight for your parents!" Draco yelled. "Fight your way to them, make sure *they're* safe- I'm not having restored their sanity only for the Dementors to take it- make sure Frank and Alice survive, that's what you need to do- Neville, *go*-"

"Alright," said Neville, and then took a deep breath, with the belief in his eyes that he was going to die, and said, "Luna, I-"

Luna seized Neville by the muddied collar of his white suit, pulled him to her, and pushed her lips against his. They could all hear the wet hit of it in the rain, both of them panting.

Neville kissed Luna for just a second, very hard, before Luna pushed him away. "Go!" she yelled, "Run!" and after a long helpless look between them, Neville ran.

"Draco," Luna said, seizing his arm, "Side-Along me," and after a stunned moment, Draco nodded. Then he had taken off his suit jacket and wrapped it around her shivering form, with her dress turned sodden and translucent by the storm. The other boys followed suit, Ron giving his jacket to Hermione, and both twins to a shaking Ginny.

"Ginny," Draco said, a rush of pity where he had felt jealousy before, because he found he didn't actually want her to die. "Ginny, you don't have to come- you can go find your parents-"

"I'm coming!" Ginny yelled. "George, take me, Fred, take Ron. Draco, take Luna and Hermione. All that bragging over Apparition licenses, Fred and George, time to deliver!"

"Where are we going?" Fred asked, looking around anxiously, and when high screams filtered from outside the castle, the students flinched back.

"It feels like we're abandoning everyone," Ron said anxiously.

"If you want to go, go," Draco said impatiently. "There's a fight here too. But I'm fighting for Harry. Are you with me?" And everyone, including a pale-faced Ron, nodded with full strength. "The telephone booth entrance to the Ministry. That's the only one I know how to Apparate to. Do you know it?" Fred and George nodded, and took hold of their siblings. "Okay, on three... one, two, three..."

Draco had not let doubt about his unlicensed Apparition come into his head, and Luna and Hermione popped into London on either side of him unhurt, all the Weasleys intact as well, in a great sodden redheaded rush towards the one red booth. They hadn't broken the Statute of Secrecy, either. It wasn't raining in London for once, but the street was almost creepily empty. Draco remembered the first time he had crossed a street in London as he ran across still hand-in-hand with Hermione and Luna. He remembered weeks before that, when Hermione had first explained how streetlights worked, as the orange glow bathed the faces of the two girls he loved most in the world, two girls he was leading into mortal danger-

He would protect them. He would never hurt them. Not the way he had hurt his mother.

He wanted to protect the Weasleys too, he found, with a pit in his stomach of fear for them. Even Ginny, who cut a very young figure as she jogged to keep up with her brothers in her wet grayed ballet flats, buttoning first one and then another white suit jacket over her soaked chiffon flower girl dress, eyes blazing with determination. He was leading them all in, maybe to the slaughter, but he had gotten them this far. It was too late to turn back now.

The squash to get all seven of them inside was incredible, but Draco still made sure he was the closest to the receiver. He could have been sick, staring at the Muggle telephone receiver and remembering Harry trying and failing to get him to call him on one over the summer, but he dialed 62442 the same, and the same monotone female voice he remembered from entering for Harry and Sirius's trials rang out. "Welcome to the Ministry of Magic. Please state your name and business."

Murder. "Draco Malfoy, Ron Weasley, Ginny Weasley, George Weasley, Fred Weasley, Luna Lovegood, Hermione Granger, here to visit the office of Mr. Arthur Weasley," he lied all in one breath, and all seven badges came clinking out of the metal coin chute.

"Thank you," the voice said. "Visitors, please take the badges and attach them to the front of your robes." Draco handed them out as the voice instructed, "Visitors to the Ministry, you are required to submit to a search and present your wands for registration at the security desk, which is located at the far end of the Atrium."

"We will," Draco lied. "Please send us."

Draco's badge read, Draco Malfoy, Office Visitor. But as the telephone box plunged down like a Muggle elevator, shaking from all their weight, his cold wrinkled wet fingers struggled to affix the badge on his soaked shirt. He saw the others were doing the same, while the grinding noise of the elevator stabbed at Draco's nerves. "Just leave it," Draco ordered, wondering who had let him take the leadership role, but he supposed he had to, as the only one who'd heard Mother tell what the Death Eaters were doing. He found himself taking the same tone of voice as he had as Slytherin captain. And, to his surprise, everyone in the elevator obeyed, pocketing their badges, as the golden light opened out on them.

Draco made them sneak out into the Atrium, but there had been no need. The place was completely deserted, unusual for even this late, with the Floos all dead. Everything had been shut down except the Fountain of Magical Brethren, which was really a pity, for aesthetic reasons...

"They'll already be in the Department of Mysteries," Draco said, and they ran again. Draco led them through the empty hall, which had the eeriness of a ghost town, or a place some terrible atrocity had already been committed. But when he looked back, he saw the twins grinning.

"Lucky we're immortal, eh?" Fred said to George.

"Real lucky, that! And it's the right group, we'll just have to pick up Harry," George said happily, and Luna and Hermione stared.

"What are you talking about?" Hermione asked, and they piled together into a real lift. The gold was shocking to see, as if Draco had already expected the Ministry to be in ruins. He pressed number nine and the lift moved noisily, but there were the twins' cheery voices to fill it.

"The night our father got attacked," Fred said breezily, "Draco formally declared it. Said all of us weren't going to die in the war. Bestowed upon us all immortality. So there's nothing to worry about. Don't worry, Hermione, we extended it to you and Luna by proxy-"

"And Neville?" Luna asked anxiously, as if this was more than Draco's bad joke.

"No, not Neville, we thought we should make it a more exclusive group," George laughed, and had to suffer Hermione's screeching, only to have her fall dead silent when the lift stopped.

"Department of Mysteries," the voice said. All they arrived to was torches and a plain black door. He and Hermione led them inside.

Then Draco had a sudden impulse. He imagined Harry's face, raised his wand, and cast, "Avenseguim." He didn't expect the tug to come into place, but it did, and he let out a gasp that had nothing to do with the round black room they had ended up in, with its circle of unmarked black doors flanked between by blue-flamed candles, nor how dark it became there once the door shut behind them. "He's got on the ring," Draco said. His heart was in his throat, because he remembered second year and trying to save Hermione. He remembered messing up this charm then, or maybe it had been the wand misleading him on purpose. But they had no other way to know where to go.

"What do you mean?" Luna asked, grabbing onto his arm as Hermione cast Lumos maxima and bathed the entire freakish room in a Patronus-like glow. "Harry?"

"I put a tracking charm," Draco told them all, "On the gold rose ring I gave him before the Third Task last year. I thought he'd lost it in the graveyard, but he must have kept it." Maybe he wore it on a chain around his neck secretly like a locket or something. It seemed likely for someone pining away of love for the giver. Draco stared down at his ghostly reflection on the

black marble and tried to figure out which way the tug was going, but then with a rumbling, the walls starting rotating, and the tug went haywire. It settled back in, though, once the walls had stilled again.

"What was that about?" Ron whispered.

"I think it was to stop us knowing which door we came in through," Ginny said, and she was probably right. But Draco had no intention of leaving. All that had showed him was yet another piece of evidence that he was doing well not to follow his old ambition to become an Unspeakable.

"We know what door to *go* through, though," Draco said, faking a confidence in his tracking charm he felt none of, and charged right towards the second door, where he was only partially sure the tug was coming the strongest. It was the fourth door, which opened to a startling beauty, lovely as the golden fairy lights over the wedding reception. But these were diamond-colored, and coming from the gleam of clocks, a great collection of them that sent shivers down Draco's spine. *Unspeakables study time travel,* he told himself, *You knew that already, it doesn't matter*, and strode resolutely through them, though he imagined he could feel some of them trying to call to him.

No, the fluctuating, beautiful light came from a crystal bell jar at the far end of the room, which entranced Ron as they passed, though Ginny dragged him unceremoniously away by the arm, with the sound of birds chirping added to the endless unsynchronized mass of foreboding ticking.

"Careful," Draco said, and pushed the door behind the jar open.

He might have feared they were too late from the sight that met them, as beautiful as it was barren, with a great sea of crystal balls, some glowing and some faded, in a blue-lit expanse of bitter cold, vaulted dark ceilings to add to the air of secrets within. There was only one secret they were all after, and that was the prophecy. Draco led them along rows of the crystal balls, thinking of some jibe about this being Hermione's worst nightmare with her hatred of Divination, but they had to be as silent as they could. It was a shame there wasn't a directory to follow of these things, P for Potter, but there were numbered rows. The tug led them down row after row, increasing Draco's fear he was taking his bedraggled friends on a wild goose chase.

Then they reached row 90 and heard voices. "Homenum revelio," Draco whispered, and saw the distinct outline in blue of two figures behind rows of the dusty crystal balls. A tall one was standing over a smaller male figure on the ground. There were more figures standing around them, in long robes from the outlines, with voices audible now. Some of them sounded very familiar. There was Vince's father, Theo's father, Greg's father, and on it went. There looked to be almost a dozen of them: Death Eaters, surely, to accompany Father, and they had them outnumbered...

It didn't matter. "Harry," he breathed. "Come on, it's them..."

Hermione seized his elbow. "We need a plan," she hissed, and Draco let her keep hold of him, but led the seven of them slowly along the rows, until they could see it was row 97 that all

one, two, three, count them, thirteen Death Eaters were standing in, with Harry there on the ground in his once-white suit dirtied beyond recognition. There was dried blood on his head, but he was awake and struggling to sit, with Father's wand in his face. All the Death Eaters looked pristine and fresh. None of them had seen combat. They hadn't been needed to send the wedding into chaos, and here they all were, many fresh out of Azkaban, primed to kill-

"No," Harry said, loudly and distinctly to some command that Draco couldn't hear, and Father slammed his walking stick across Harry's face. Harry crumpled to the ground, and the shrill, unhinged female laugh then- Draco *knew* that laugh-

"We need a plan," Hermione said, "Draco, that's your *father*."

"Take the prophecy down off the shelf," Father ordered Harry, "And give it to me. Or we start using wands."

"And what," Harry gasped, looking dazed from the blows he had taken to the head but fully defiant still. "And you just let me go then? I don't think so. The minute I give you what you want-"

"Crucio!" yelled the voice of Bellatrix Lestrange.

Harry began to convulse on the ground. Ginny covered her mouth, and Hermione buried her face in Ron's shoulder.

They all stood there paralyzed, still unseen, watching Harry writhe in pain, as he suffered what Draco had so many, many times in that one nightmare summer of 1996, the summer that was about to start. His summer with the distant figure of his Aunt Bella, unmistakable now, gaunt skeletal face behind a wild whip of dark hair like the tattered robes of a Dementor. She did not look like her Boggart. Her Boggart had not captured the energy that seemed to seethe off her dark frame like barely constrained bloodthirst.

Her laugh was more piercing, as she gloatingly watched Harry scream.

When Harry refused to obey, Father stepped forward with clear frustration. *He's supposed to be the leader, not her, and this isn't going to plan.* "Imperio!" he cast, and Draco almost laughed. "Retrieve the prophecy! Retrieve it!" he yelled once the light hit. Harry trembled, as much in the aftermath of Bellatrix's Cruciatus as the effort of fighting off the Imperius, and did not obey.

"What should we do?" Luna whispered anxiously, and Fred and George looked helpless.

Draco closed his eyes, trying to think, while the sound of Harry panting and Father screaming at him filled the vast chamber, echoing in a thousand fragments of nightmare. He opened his eyes and said, "Fiendfyre."

"No!" Hermione protested.

"It's all I have," Draco breathed, "I can't think of anything else," and then Ron pressed his pale face forward between them.

"I have an idea," he said.

Marble and Fire

Chapter Notes

Playlist

Draco strode down row 97, hands linked behind his head in a universal posture of non-resistance. They all looked up and a dozen wands raised, but Father held up a hand. "Draco," he said, voice full of doubt. "Did your mother send you? Have you come back to your family?"

The fact that Father would so much as entertain that idea sent pure contempt through Draco, but he rushed to Father's side and said in his most earnest tone, "Yes, Father. Don't worry, Mother's safe. She told me exactly where to go. I Apparated her back to the Manor before I came. She was so exhausted from the spells..."

The voice of every fear Draco had ever had spoke behind him. It said his name.

Bellatrix Lestrange was striding towards him, cheekbones so sunken he almost didn't recognize her, but for that heavy-lidded gaze with a deeper darkness in it than Draco had ever seen, even in Voldemort's red eyes. "Draco. So Cissy's little son has come back to the fold claiming repentance. Do you know who I am, boy?"

"Of course," Draco said steadily, and then bent the knee in submission, falling to one knee before her and inclining his head. "You're my Aunt Bella. It's an honor to meet you." He fought back a shiver as her skeleton hand pulled his face up. Then she was at the barriers of his mind. He imagined the obsidian knife she had taught him, and her intrusion bounced off, sensing no lies.

"Draco?" Harry breathed, crawling towards him, weak and disbelieving, but there was not enough betrayal there yet. Harry had too much faith in him, even after their fight, after so long having the opposite problem. Draco would have to change that in the eyes of the dozen Death Eaters watching them, with every one of them only a hair's breadth surely from casting Avada Kedavra. Not on Harry, who was needed for the prophecy, but on Draco. Harry's hand touched Draco's ankle, and Draco shook it away.

Draco leaned down and slapped him across that beautiful face he had kissed so many times, a hard enough blow to send him crashing back to the stone floor. "Don't presume to touch me, half-blood," he spat, and heard Bellatrix let out a disturbing cackle. Dolohov and a few others joined her.

"Draco," Nott said shakily, "We truly wish to believe you have come to our side, but-"

"Silence," Father snapped. "*I* will address my son. What has prompted this change of heart?"

Draco fished into his pocket, and pulled out the pair of Black earrings, their golden frames glinting. "I sent these to her. For our house," he said, watching Bellatrix's eyes fasten on their sigil. He could see her husband and brother-in-law behind her like vultures, all a second from swooping, but he couldn't let himself get distracted and fall off the tightrope. "She was wearing them tonight. And she gave them to me, as a sign for you to know, Father, that she had told me everything and I had agreed. I didn't-" He put a lump in his throat. "It wasn't easy to turn my back on them, but I had to protect my mother. And she said- she said there's something wrong with my wand, and Aunt Bella knows what it is. She told me it had to do with *Dantanian Noir*. I heard that and I knew I didn't have a choice."

"What has she sent you to do?" Father asked, taking the earrings and showing them to Bella and then the others, as if they meant anything at all.

"To ask Aunt Bella about my wand. To give more firepower," Draco said casually, avoiding Bellatrix's gaze at anything close to mentioning the wand, "But mostly, to convince *him*." He prodded at Harry's side contemptuously with his shoe. "I can get him to give you the prophecy."

"How?" Father asked suspiciously, and Draco smirked.

"Easy," he said, and pulled Harry to his feet. Harry was not so good an actor. There was still no real betrayal in his eyes, but none of these people knew Harry the way he did. That bewildered exhaustion would have to suffice. "I can ask him. Harry, take the prophecy down."

"What?" Harry breathed, and Draco took his hand, stroking it reassuringly. In the fall of his hand from Harry's, he let Mother's wand slide down into Harry's pocket.

"Harry," Draco said, staring into his eyes. "You have to do this for me. If you don't, they won't accept me back. They'll kill me. They'll torture me too. I know you don't want to see me hurt. You have to trust me. If you love me, Harry, give my father the prophecy."

There was an eruption of consternation and disgust from the Death Eaters. But Draco didn't let their gazes part. And finally, Harry nodded. If he wouldn't have been convinced already, he had to feel the wand that had gone into his pocket. "Alright, Draco. For you."

"Is this some kind of trick?" one of the Lestrange men demanded, and Father held up a hand, gaze going greedy. He wanted to believe so badly that he could pull this off, to prove his worth. He wanted to believe he could have his son and his good name and all his power back, and everything would be exactly as he wished, because he was a Malfoy.

Harry reached up and took the prophecy marked Harry Potter down from its place, with the crystal ball covered in dust. "Explode them," he said in Draco's ear, "The crystal balls, all of them, explode it." He had held the crystal ball out to Father. His hands were trembling, and they didn't stop Father when he greedily snatched it. With his wand in his right hand, he took it with his left. Just as Draco had known he would.

"Cauterizo!" Draco screamed, and Father let out a howl of pain and dropped the crystal ball. It fell to the stone and shattered, and the pearly-white figure of Sybil Trelawney with huge stricken eyes floated between them.

"*Neither can live-*"

Father howled in pain, clutching at his wrist as the talon brand burned at his palm.

"Listen!" Bellatrix implored them, desperate to hear the prophecy, to not fail her so-beloved lord. "Listen- Lucius, *quiet*-"

But it was no use. The sound of Father's agony was unending, and Trelawney's words were lost forever. "Expelliarmus!" Draco yelled, with the Death Eaters' eyes all on their failure, their fear for even an absent Dark Lord so much stronger than any fear of Draco and Harry. Both Father and Harry's wands came to his hand.

Draco threw Harry his real wand, which would be sure to work for him. And together, backs against one another's, they screamed, "REDUCTO!"

Their curses flew into the shelves on either side, dozens of crystal balls crashing down on them. Harry seized Draco's hand, and they ran, not down the row but into the shattering glass. He could see Hermione hidden behind the row with the others, face turning up in silent horror.

"Protego!" Ron yelled, and a shield came up, but not enough for all six of them-

"Ninguifors!" Draco cried. It was snow falling down on the eight of them as he pulled Harry into where the other six had crept up, waiting for their cue to cast the Stunning curses on the Death Eaters. "New plan! Harry?"

"Cast Reducto! Everywhere! We're taking this place apart!" Harry yelled, and as one, in unison, the eight members of Dumbledore's army fell into a circle against the sound of breaking glass and the furious howls of Death Eaters, and screamed, "REDUCTO!"

The explosion this time was deafening, like a real bomb going off, as good as Confringo cast half a dozen times as shelves began to rattle down all around them. Bellatrix shrieked as her charge towards them through the rows was blocked by a wall of prophecies all descending on her, a cacophony of ghostly pale figures and their breathless words all sounding their last. "Run!" Harry yelled, and they did, following where Harry led them out of row 96 and beside the collapsing shelves, but they were falling everywhere in every direction, glass raining down upon them just like the dust of Citadelle Xaphan, and really, you couldn't match the destructive capacity of a Malfoy...

They'd set off a chain reaction, with their explosions leading to more crashes and ghostly voices determined to speak of the future that had passed them by. Shards of glass fell and cut at them, and Draco saw one slice a cut across Luna's face. At her shriek, he tried to lunge for her, but then he couldn't see her, as an entire shelf crashed between them. Then he was just running, as he knew they all were, sprinting in the direction of the door without able to see it or much of anything anymore. He ran for his life, unable to hear anyone doing the same or

anyone pursuing him, and ran through the door without daring to lock it shut behind him, not knowing who else might have escaped.

He ran and ran, past the grandfather clocks, only thinking after a while, with his hair full of blood and mud and broken glass, to push the matted strands out of his eyes so he could see again. He tore out of the Time Room and into the circular black marble room. His mind began to calculate which door could possibly be the one to the lift, when he realized, *I can't leave them behind. I came here to get Harry, and I'm not leaving without him. Without any of them. Even Ginny fucking Weasley.*

The room seemed already to be spinning around him. Even though when he looked at the only real distinct break in the blackness, the blue candles, they were unmoving. He could hear distant crashes and screams, but he could not make sense of any direction or which door. He felt lost and impotent, remembering the last sight he'd had of any of them: Luna's adorable face slicing open... It hovered before his mind's eye for a paralyzed moment, mixing with his mother's pale tortured face until he remembered Harry's ring.

"Avenseguim," Draco cast, and felt the tug towards one of the doors. He ran inside and saw what looked like a great ancient amphitheater, with one part of some real amphitheater preserved: an archway a millennium older-looking than any of Citadelle Xaphan, and just as liable to crumble. There was a long tattered black veil hanging before it which told him exactly what that gateway was, from all of his reading. Though he felt a pull towards it, he knew to stay away from it. Its appeal was nothing compared to the tug on his body leading him to Harry. He advanced through the dark room towards it, casting Lumos and just seeing it reflect along with his own shadow on the stone. He didn't see Harry, just the steep steps downwards that surrounded the archway he avoided anxiously. But he could hear footsteps.

"Harry?" he called, and then a hand had seized around his throat and slammed him against the wall. The palm was hot, with the heat narrow and bent where it touched his skin.

"Draco," Father said, voice furious, "Draco, how could you," and his grip was almost strangling, like a panic attack but tighter. When he felt the thin chain of Theo's necklace gritting into his palm, he muttered something derisive about *protection*, then ripped it clear off and tossed it away, where it flew somewhere down the steps of the amphitheater. Then his hands were on Draco's neck again, squeezing.

Draco tried to reach up and pull Father's hands off. He found he couldn't, any more than he could have stopped Father from beating him for the first time when he was four or five, making weak aborted protesting sounds as he scratched to no avail. *He's trying to kill me, isn't he... Father is trying to... but- but Harry's right here, Harry will save me...*

His vision was dimming in barely protesting spurts of shadow, like the last time in the cellar after the World Cup, all the world dropping away except pain... dimming and dimming- but then there was the flicker of something bright, in the glow of his dropped wand. He saw gold on Father's fingers. A golden rose.

Draco hadn't been following Harry at all.

"That's Harry's," Draco gasped out. "That ring-"

"I took it in the graveyard," Father hissed, hands loosening as feeling deeper than anger struggled across his face. "As a souvenir, to remember when we had Harry Potter at our mercy. And we will again, once you are no longer in the *way*." He examined it wanly. "It looks just like the roses under our terrace garden. I had the suspicion this was some of your transfigured jewelry, a gift to him. Perhaps I was sentimental, to want to keep *something* from my... talented son." His once-handsome, unshaven face had the strained, shattered quality of Bellatrix's. "You could have joined us. You could have been great. You could have, for your *mother's* sake-"

Father faltered as the thought seemed to belatedly strike him, his left hand leaving Draco's neck to fumble in Draco's topmost pocket and pull out one of the earrings he'd shown him, the sigil of greyhounds a mere glittering shadow. "What did you do, Draco? These *are* from your mother! What did you do to her?"

"Nothing as painful," Draco hissed, "As what I'm going to do to you," and pulled Periander's dagger from his other pocket and drove it into his father's palm. It slashed rather than stabbed, but it was enough to send Father stumbling, screaming as his right palm dripped with bright red blood. His throat released, Draco fell on his wand like an animal in a trap, lifting it with its glow still brilliant until he replaced Lumos with Cauterizo. Father doubled over, falling to his knees at the pain in the other palm. Draco pocketed his dagger and advanced on Father, watching an already disarmed Father grapple senseless at his wrist with not half as much dignity as Mother had.

"Cauterizo," was all Draco said. The talon wand worked perfectly in his hand despite Bella's presence in the same building, maybe in the same room even soon. But it didn't matter. His arm was the wand, and he could feel the current of shadow pushing out already, with each call of Cauterizo darkening the air. "Cauterizo! Cauterizo! Cauterizo!" It wasn't just burning at the surface. It was burning into Father's skin, searing the flesh off the hand.

"Draco!" Father screamed. "Draco, stop- Draco, please, have mercy-"

"When!" Draco shrieked. "Cauterizo! When? Mercy? In the cellars? When? WHEN HAVE YOU EVER SHOWED ME MERCY? CAUTERIZO!" He knew their voices must be drawing attention, friend and foe, but nothing mattered but casting the spell.

It was nothing like doing it to Mother. There was no voice in his head anywhere, not even at a distance, telling him to stop. More power surged with every word, his very fingertips on the talon wand crackling with bursts like black lightning. Ink poured out and seared dark into the white-hot flame on Father's hand as he screamed. Draco cast Cauterizo over and over until he was breathless. Father was sobbing, tears falling down his face, and Draco heard himself laughing, high and strident, or maybe it was sobbing, as tears fell from his own eyes.

"You never," Draco gasped, "Never showed me mercy, but you- *you* were the weak one! Cauterizo!"

Father tried to run and Draco pursued him, casting Cauterizo time after time and making him stumble, though he managed to make it out the door into the blank marble room again, near the very center of the circle like some sacrifice, like the star at the center of Hecate's wheel- before Draco caught up and had him flat on his back, casting it again point-blank.

And again and again, until Draco's entire body was simmering with shadow and power. He could barely see Father's hand behind all the murkiness in the smoking air laid over with the smell of flesh burning. Finally, he cast the spell for what felt the hundredth time, and nothing happened.

"Cauterizo," he tried, and there was no brand to respond to it. "Ventus!" he barked, making the smoke and haze clear around them, and saw his sobbing father doubled over still clutching his wrist, with nothing left to burn away. Where there had been a hand, a cauterized stump was left behind. There was only the small glint of the gold rose ring melted down with it into the flesh, as destroyed as the hand that had once been there.

There was something too pitiful in Father's sobbing to listen to any longer. "Stupefy," Draco cast without any malice left, knocking Father out. He closed his eyes, taking a breath, trying to explain to himself what it was that he had just done-

The red light of Expelliarmus flew at him. Draco dropped to the floor beside his father just in time, face hitting his shaking arm stripped of its hand.

"Protego horribilis!" Draco cast, before a flurry of curses flew down red and green over him, battering at him with no concern for Lucius's body beside him. Maybe they thought Draco had already killed him. Draco looked up and every one of the Death Eaters had been drawn by the screams like sharks to blood, advancing closer.

"Everte statum!" Draco yelled. He sent Father's body flying at Bellatrix, the most dangerous Death Eater. She went down in a heap. Draco ducked low again, only to see the red of Stunning spells flying not towards him, but towards an opening door, where the seven other students were streaming in, Harry calling Draco's name. Harry pulled George and Hermione and Ginny to the ground, Luna's shielding spell coming up and saving her and Fred, but Ron crumbled, caught. Fred and Ginny grabbed Ron's weight, eyes panicked, and Draco screamed, "Come here! I'll protect you!"

"What?" George bellowed, grabbing onto Ron's shoulder.

"Bring Ron!" Draco yelled. They all cast shielding charms and ran forward, Harry leading them to Draco as the Death Eaters advanced from the other side, a solid line of eleven all in pitch black. The moment the students seemed close enough-

"PROTEGO DIABOLICA!"

All of the power Draco had felt pouring into him as he cast Cauterizo surged out, blue flames drenching the world behind him, the same color as the candles on the walls but hotter, whiter at the center. They danced out like water spirits, surging in the startled face of Bellatrix, who jumped back before the fire blocked her from view entirely. Draco painted her away, painting a low circle all around them with the fire. He looked back to see his friends' faces spellbound in wonder, as Draco raised his wand like a conductor and painted a wall between them and the Death Eaters in fire.

"Yes," Harry hissed, bloodied face alight, his green eyes dancing as he walked right to his side. "Yes, *Draco*," he breathed, and clasped Draco's shoulder and stood at his side, as Draco

lifted his wand over his head and swept it in a circle, sealing them off from the threat.

"Neville will tell someone, the Order will come," Ginny said, bent down to check Ron's pulse, and Fred cast Enervate. The sight of Ron sitting up, albeit blearily rubbing his head, gave an additional push to the flames as he built them like a great blue wall of ice, a million Patronuses crystallized into one like charcoal into diamonds but darker. It was glittering but it was dark, the darkest thing he had ever felt. It was what he had cast to show off to Harry last year, but *real*, thicker and truer. If any of the Death Eaters tried to step through those flames, they *would* die of it.

Bellatrix knew what it was. She was yelling for them to step back, not to try and cross. "Protego Diabolica! Grindelwald, you fools!" he heard her yelling. Ever the dark magic expert, his aunt. She was never insane enough when you really needed her to be. From the sound of it, she had to talk her worthless husband, good old Uncle Rodolphus, out of charging. Pity. Draco would have happily taken that life on his conscience, given that it would be the man's own fault for his stupidity.

Instead of trying to walk through, the Death Eaters were soon trying curses and counter-curses, flashing every color of light. The flames repelled it, the air around them simmering with the haze from their brilliance. The dark ceiling above reflected every curse like an eruption of Weasley fireworks. The room itself had become an ice fortress of simmering blue. It was all silver-ice, like Draco's room at Grimmauld, the flames were so high and soaring. When the fireworks went off, it was like New Year's Eve again. He even had Harry by his side.

"How are we still *alive*," Hermione breathed, reaching to help pull a weak Ron up between her and the twins, and then fell against Draco, a weight on his other shoulder, Harry at his left and Hermione at his right. "Draco, how long will this hold-"

"I don't know," Draco said, and then raised his voice. "But listen, if it seems it's going to fall, tell me, and I'll cast it again. I'm not tired, I can keep this up- but Luna, your *face*-"

"It's alright," said Luna. But along with her neck and hair, the muddied suit jacket Draco had given her was dripped over in drying blood. Draco had to shake off Harry and Hermione, where he leaned down and began to hum, casting Vulnera satentur.

Inside the ring of flame, it felt like his magic was more potent, like some hermetically sealed space where only Draco's power ruled. Her face healed in an instant, and she smiled at him without any fear he could see in her eyes. She seemed full of faith, and he realized with a twist of his gut, that faith was in him. And, Salazar save them all, in Neville Longbottom.

"Neville will bring everyone," she said, agreeing with what Ginny had said. "He will, and they'll help us fight them off. We just have to wait..."

"Draco, what is this?" Fred asked. They huddled as tight as they could, facing in the direction all the curses were coming. At least the Death Eaters did not seem to have made a circle around, to ambush them with Stunners or worse once the flames fell. It was a waiting game, whether the Order would arrive or the fire would die first.

"Dark magic," Draco said simply, and kept his wand raised.

"Listen," Harry ordered, his natural command coming to the fore again. "Listen what they're doing, where they're going. We can't see them properly, but they know where all of us are..."

They all fell silent, staring at the shadowy figures of Death Eaters behind the lights.

It seemed just another shadow, but the shadow that appeared from one side of the room, advancing steadily towards the flames, was one that made every person there go silent. They didn't need for the flames to fall to know who it was, once Harry screamed and grabbed at his scar.

"Voldemort," Hermione whispered, "It's Voldemort, Draco-"

With a wordless yell, the tall dark shadow raised his wand over his head and slashed it through the air like slitting a throat. It was like all the air left the room at once. The ring of blue flames died in an instant. Protego Diabolica- the most powerful spell Draco knew, his trump card, the only ace he had left- it had been dismantled by the Dark Lord without that hideous noseless face having to utter a single word.

He looked more like the Dark Lord that Draco remembered from Malfoy Manor in the blue loop, no longer so starved and skeletal. A year back to life had done him good, filling out those albino bones and making him cut a more menacing figure in his flowing black robes. He was still gaunt, though, and his eyes were a terrible red. He looked nothing like the man Luna must be remembering so well. Draco cast a nervous glance at her, worried she would break down at the very sight of her Boggart upgraded to an even crueler monster. But she was standing just where she had been before, face as white as Voldemort's. Harry had already taken a step forward, putting himself between them and the grotesque snakelike monster, always and forever the hero, no matter how much he suffered.

He could have yelled out through the flames, but Voldemort only spoke once there was nothing between him and the huddled students but a few feet. So powerful, and yet always the drama queen nonetheless. That sardonic thought gave Draco the edge of contempt he needed, to face up to what was surely death now- but if Neville brought the others before it was too late-

"Harry Potter," Voldemort said coldly. "I believe you have something that belongs to me."

None of the Death Eaters seemed to have the nerve to tell him it was destroyed, not even Bellatrix, though they had all seen it. Voldemort advanced forward, his feet making no sound on the black marble, and gave a cruel smirk when he saw the students clinging so close together.

"Don't worry, children. Hand over Potter, and I will let you all leave here tonight- that is, except for the Malfoy-"

"Lacarnum inflamari!" Harry yelled, and sent out not a fireball but a jet of fire towards Voldemort. The trouble was, the Dark Lord knew he had that spell this time, and contemptuously waved it aside. He lifted a shield that made it stream harmlessly around him,

casting a golden sheen of an orb about his spindly amphibian arms. It ricocheted back and around to the Death Eaters behind him, a virtual firestorm that had them screaming and fleeing backwards, jumping back or raising their own shields, retreating again from the flames.

The jet of flame from Harry's wand fell away. Draco could see Harry raising it again, mouthing a spell, but too slowly. Voldemort, with a wall of brilliant red flame behind him, had already begun to cast.

"Avada-"

"Tom!"

Draco froze, Harry froze, and most importantly, Voldemort froze, at the impossible sight of Luna in her sullied flower girl dress and ballet flats, as she ran out between the Dark Lord and the Boy Who Lived. Draco noticed, for the first time, that she still had wet snowdrops in her hair.

"Luna," Draco gasped, but she didn't seem to hear him, going towards the most evil thing that had ever lived without an ounce of fear in the spring in her step.

"I'm Xenophilius Lovegood's daughter," Draco heard her whispering to herself. "I can do this. I'm Xenophilius Lovegood's daughter... TOM!" she called again, filthy and radiant.

"Do not call me that name!" Voldemort snarled.

"But that's who you are," Luna said calmly. "Tom Riddle. That's the name I know you by."

Voldemort's wand was still raised, but he seemed more caught off-guard than anyone now, while the Death Eaters behind him struggled to put out Harry's flames. "Who are you, girl?"

"You don't know me," Luna said, voice ringing out clear and melodic as a songbird over the fire-darkened marble. "But I know you, Tom Riddle. I know everything about you. Things you likely don't even remember about yourself. I know what the boys called you in the orphanage. I know what they did on your seventh birthday. I know it all."

If he could look into her head, as he might well be doing, he would see she wasn't lying.

"Are you mad?" Voldemort asked with contempt, and Luna nodded brightly.

"I am," she said proudly. "I'm loony. And I have something for you, Tom Riddle."

"LUNA!" Draco screamed, racing forward, but it was too late. Voldemort had reached out his hand, seeming to think she was about to give over the prophecy. And from less than a meter away from Voldemort, Luna reached into her pocket and withdrew a slender red glass vial just like the one Hermione had given Draco.

"No, Luna, you'll die," Draco gasped, and Hermione seized him from behind and pulled him and Harry away, back to the others. "Not Fiendfyre-"

But his voice that had been so vicious tonight failed, after all the screaming and smoke.

Luna only looked back for a moment, to give him her calm angelic smile, before she turned and threw the vial right into the face of the Dark Lord.

The Fountain

Chapter Notes

Playlist

The world did not go up in flames, only in screaming. Voldemort screamed like a siren going off and flew backwards, before crumbling to the ground only just before his followers who were still half on fire. The potion had hit the right side of his face squarely, and the smooth white snake flesh there was melting away, dripping down clean off the bone in pus-like rivulets of white and wine red. He clawed at his face and more flesh came away, left side of his face getting mottled with it, as his palms smeared it across that as well. He left holes in his cheeks, spots of brighter white that Draco did not understand, until he saw the skin was liquefying and peeling away down to the bone.

It dripped away from Voldemort's neck, exposing the long sinuous tendons of his throat and the brittle bones there as well. He made helpless hissing noises, grappling at his throat like a victim just afflicted with Langlock. But his screams were loud and panicked between the hissing, and Draco stared while he felt himself dragged backwards by Hermione, stared at the Dark Lord's skull half-revealed with flesh dripping down over his black robes, the cheekbone a jagged bent form over which there gaped the now empty socket of his right eye, melted just as completely away-

"My lord!" Bellatrix gasped. She cast Aqua eructo to extinguish the flames from Harry's Lacarnum inflamari, enough to run through them towards him. The frayed hem of her robes caught alight, but she barely seemed to notice, flicking her wand again to douse herself before turning her attention back to her beloved madman, her husband in the midst of Harry's fire and ignored. "My lord, what have they done-"

Draco was dragged backwards through a door that took him out of sight range completely, and into the bright untainted gold he only realized at the sound of all of their panting breath compressed into such a cramped space: the lift they had arrived in, and they had found the right door. "How did you know it was this one?" Luna asked Hermione. Fear for her let its death grip slightly off his heart, though they were not out of this yet, with the anti-Apparition wards on the Ministry. They were not out of this at all.

"The floors," Hermione gasped, pressing the button for the entrance floor to the Ministry and then the close button over and over until the rattling lift obeyed. "I used a spell... magnification... to look at the floors, past the fire... this is the door... with the most, ah, scuffing, it had been opened the most..."

"Hermione, you're a wonder!" Ron exclaimed, and Hermione grabbed at him.

"Ron, are you hurt? Everyone, are you wounded?"

Everyone avowed, perhaps with false bravado, that they were unhurt, unbothered, and ready to battle for their lives once more with as much fight in them as ever. The Weasleys fell onto Ron after Hermione let him go, acclaiming his plan while they checked him for lingering dazedness from being stunned. When Fred asked him how he'd thought of it, Draco heard him say, "Well, Harry and me spent enough time the first couple years not sure what side Draco was on, and he was *trying* to convince us he was on this side. Figured he'd be good at playing it the other way..."

"I can't believe it worked," Hermione gasped. She began to laugh shakily, trying to push her hair out of her face ineffectually. After everything they had been through tonight, from the elements and the Dementors and worst of all the humans, her thick soot-darkened mane looked almost as wild as Bella's.

"I know!" Luna squealed, hugging her side. "I said it, under my breath. Dominexcorio!"

Draco reached into his pocket to take a closer look at the vial Hermione had given him. It was red, yes, as he had noticed before, but not precisely the simmering orange-red of Liquid Fiendfyre. It was the smooth velvety deep red of Naufragiam.

Everything clicked into place for him. "I know you thought- after the ritual in the graveyard- Harry's blood in him- but we couldn't be sure-"

"You weren't sure? Of what?" Harry asked, green eyes humongous and haunted. "What was that you threw? How did you-"

"It was Hermione's idea," Luna said brightly. "I can't take credit."

"Hermione, the potion- it was-" Draco began, and Hermione smiled at him, beautiful and brilliant, for a brief moment in time that almost stopped. And then it began to run again.

"I thought you understood, when I gave it to you- the plan- there's no time," Hermione said briskly, as the doors opened to the empty foyer of the Ministry. Incredibly, Ginny had the presence of mind, after pressing the button to hold the door open, to press every button for every floor, to stall for when it would reach level 9 again. "Should we try to activate a Floo-"

"No time!" Harry called. "We run for the lift we came in. NOW!"

So they ran, no more time indeed for anything- as Severus had said so intelligently- but survival. Survival put the speed into their exhausted legs, though the Quidditch players could run faster, Hermione threatening to lag behind, Luna still more, and Ron behind them all with the lingering effects of the Stunning hex.

"Come on!" Harry yelled, and took Luna by the hand, while Draco fell into step right beside Hermione. "We don't let anyone lag behind and get picked off! They could be here any second!"

Draco tried to stifle a hysterical laugh at the idea of Voldemort with his melted face, his burned followers, and a one-handed Father tapping their feet and checking their watches, impatiently waiting for the elevator to come back down.

Fred and George helped drag Ron along the very long hall, steps skidding on the gleaming dark wood, past the empty security station, until they were approaching the Fountain of Magical Brethren, which meant they were halfway.

"Come on!" Draco yelled to spur them on. "If they catch us, we die! They're not letting us live, not after what we did to him-"

But there had been some enchantment placed on all of them, surely, because the hall had never been half this long, like they were cursed to run on and just have the distance before them grow larger. Draco had not only been training four nights a week at Quidditch until recently, he had been energized by the effects of casting Cauterizo, kept the Dementors far away with his dragon Patronus, and avoided the gargoyles entirely. Yet he began to feel it was his body dragging his legs along rather than the legs themselves moving. The muscles were going slack, threatening to give way, even for him. He could not imagine how the others' legs felt, how their bodies were even still moving, many with skin and clothes caked in blood along with filth, Harry's face covered in blood over an entire temple. But for that unending hall, they all kept running.

They rounded the fountain and caught sight of other people running down the hall towards them. All their wands came out at once, but there were too few of them, and none of them could ever have mistaken the voice that called to them as a Death Eater's.

"Harry! You saved him!" Neville cried out.

Beside him, Draco could make out Sirius and Remus, and Frank and Alice. *No! No, this can't-*

He didn't know who he was more terrified to be leading Aunt Bella to.

"Harry!" Sirius yelled. "Come on, to *me*, *Harry*-"

"We're coming!" Harry yelled back, and they sprinted with renewed energy.

"Just them?" George called, complaining, as the two groups raced to join.

"The Order- many of the Order, hurt, badly," Neville panted, voice audible as they neared, only a handful of steps from each other. "The castle... unconscious, lots of the members- still fighting there, could only find- Sirius and Remus, I found- fighting at my parents' side- told them- they insisted to come-"

"Let's get out of here!" Sirius yelled joyfully, and stretched out a hand, reaching for Harry to join them and flee-

"CONFRINGO!"

Sirius flew back. Every one of Dumbledore's Army and the Order flew back, thrown apart from each other by the blasting curse. None of them were directly hit, but merely the air expelled knocked them back. It had missed decimating anyone the way it would have at a closer range, with Bellatrix running between them from a door at the side, between Floo fireplaces, a small unmarked door that looked secret, Death Eaters pouring out behind her. If she'd meant to separate them, Bellatrix had succeeded. On the plus side, with death surely impending now- between the groups, they *did* have the enemy securely pent up between them.

"The Longbottoms!" Bellatrix cackled jubilantly. "Oh, my brave Longbottoms! I'd heard you were out of St. Mungo's. How lovely of you, to bring your son to meet me! Shall I show you, boy, what I did to your mother? SHALL I?"

"Where did they come from?" Ron yelled, panicked, and Dolohov cackled.

"Do you think there is only one way out of the Department of Ministries, children? Aruspices mitte!" he cast with glee.

If Hermione hadn't tackled Ron out of the way, it would have been his entrails along with scorch marks decorating the Ministry's beautiful hard wood floors.

Harry was pulling them each around to run backwards, barking for them to split up to give more different targets to draw fire. The Death Eaters were shooting curses as they fled back into the Ministry, light flashing over their heads and against their shields as Harry drew them behind the fountain- but Sirius, Remus, Neville- *Frank and Alice*- Bellatrix had stolen their lives, Bellatrix had driven them mad, *Bellatrix was here-*

"And there she is! The little whore! Little blonde whore likes throwing funny things- ha ha ha..."

Bellatrix's laugh echoed throughout the vast halls as she called out for what sounded to be Luna. It was objectively hilarious that she didn't even know Luna's name. Mother must not have thought Luna important enough to tell the other Death Eaters about her. Draco pushed aside the thought that Mother might not have, on purpose, in order to *protect* Luna. He couldn't afford to let remorse split him now. *Survival.*

"On three, we go around the fountain, and throw Stunning spells at them," Harry ordered. "Weasleys to the right, others to the left- alright? One... two... three..."

And Draco was running with him and Hermione and Luna as one back around the fountain, at the same time four bedraggled redheads came around the other bend-

"STUPEFY!" they all yelled, a chorus of young voices full of perfect conviction as the red light exploded out from either side of the fountain like jets of crimson water, spells flashing past the Death Eaters and impacting their shields. One of them crumpled and fell, though Draco couldn't see who.

"Get them!" Bellatrix shrieked, the de facto commander with Father missing. And Father wasn't the only one absent. Draco expected his knees to falter beneath him, the way they

always did at the sight of his Boggart. But the real Bellatrix did not have the same fear for him, he found. Not after what he had just done to his father. He was less frightened of her than of what she might do to Luna, to the Longbottoms, to Sirius, if he didn't turn her towards him first-

"Where's your *lord*?" Draco yelled, drawing her attention as he brandished her own wand in her direction. He could see flashes of magic in the background, but no Voldemort. Nor had Harry's scar seemed to twinge again. "Snake-faced bitch sitting this one out? Did Tom Riddle flee? Like a *fucking coward*?"

Bellatrix cast Alarte ascendare, and Draco's feet left the ground. He soared into the air and over the statues on the fountain, crashing down into the badly-designed house elf with its lamentably small eyes and falling face-first with a split lip into the fountain. In the air, for a split second, he had seen their numbers look around even, with Voldemort's distinctive marred figure nowhere in sight, so they were not doomed. The Naufragiam had hurt him badly enough that he had *ran*, and maybe they could win now, *maybe*- if Draco could take Bellatrix down.

He had seen the Longbottoms huddled together, shooting spells in synchronization. He'd seen Sirius and Remus back-to-back, fighting for their lives- and the thought hit him then that today was the day Sirius was meant to die. He froze where he was submerged bleeding into the water, nearly getting himself hit by Bellatrix's yell of Crucio before he dodged away. He whirled to face her as she stalked gliding towards him like some malevolent spirit born from the water, with the fighting going on below them at a remove. She had clearly wanted to isolate him. "You're not having my wand!" Draco screamed, and she threw her arms in the air.

"I *will* have my wand!" she shrieked. "I will have my vault and what you stole! I will have your *hands*, blood traitor- I will feed them finger by finger down your pet Mudblood's throat, and pile her raped corpse atop yours and that ugly blonde cunt and your little weakling *Potter*-"

"Langlock!" Draco screamed, but Bellatrix saw it coming a mile away.

Rather than merely block, her power was such that the curse was not absorbed but deflected by her shield, right back onto Draco. His gasp was wordless as his tongue locked to the roof of his mouth, his own curse muting him like he had muted so many others. And she sprang forward, casting Flagello and conjuring a whip of fire to her wand. She slashed it through the air at him. His ears stopped working for a moment, so close struck that swishing slash through the air like a bolt of thunder-

In one desperate swing of his arm, Draco pulled his moonstone dagger and slashed wildly back at the whip. It held it off, but the force threw the dagger from Draco's hand into the water, clattering down inside all the coins there to benefit St. Mungo's, the glitter of moonstones fading as fire came down again sizzling against the water. Draco dove behind the statue, and the house elf's head was whipped clean off as a cackling Bellatrix advanced. Then she had severed the torso, her cackle growing with a magical exhilaration he knew well himself. The whip flew out, grazing the water just beside him and making his legs jerk from the sudden burst so near of unimaginable heat-

"Finite incantatem," Draco tried to say, pointing his wand at himself, but his tongue wouldn't move, and the magic didn't work without the incantation. Bellatrix slashed her whip in a few flourishes, visibly feeding off his terror, and tossed her long curly dark hair back with some ghoulish ghost of her beauty still visible across that haughty aristocratic face and hooded eyes.

"Come out and play, little nephew!" Bellatrix singsonged. "You owe me your hands!"

Draco dove beneath the rearing centaur, and her whip descended where he had been a second earlier. He tried to cast on himself, knowing he should be able to use the simple blanket counter-curse against his own Langlock spell, but he had never been any better at wordless magic than wandless magic...

She rolled her whip low, striking the hindquarters off the centaur, and the great gold beast fell on him with all its weight. Draco almost managed to roll away, but not quite. Its weight came down on his side, pinning him. He might have screamed for help, with the many duels going on beneath in the distance. But he could not even let any of his friends know he was about to die.

At least the centaur blocked him from the Cruciatus curse, jerking over him, but he could hear Bellatrix's footsteps splashing through the water, coming closer and closer...

Draco jabbed his wand frantically against his throat trapped there under the water, then right at his tongue, tasting the sharp acidity of magic, tasting ashes, and thought at the talon wand, *Please, if you don't want to go back to her,* save *me, I'll die, she'll take you back- Finite incantatem, finite incantatem-*

His tongue fell back out of its lock. "Oppugno!" he screamed, and the centaur reared up yet again and sprang at Bellatrix. She shrieked and fell under it, only to appear a second later slashing her burning whip through its middle. "Diffindo!" Draco yelled, trying to cut through the bottom of the remaining statues and sever them from the fountain to attack her. But he couldn't aim, he'd inhaled so much bloody sooty water in his lungs-

"Flagello!" he cast, and his wand became a flaming whip of his own.

He did just as Bellatrix had. She was teaching him still. He dragged his whip fast in a circle under the water, cutting away the bonds of the statues to the fountain.

"Oppugno!" he cast, and just when Bellatrix had decimated the centaur, gasping for breath, the wizard and goblin attacked her too. Draco fell back against the rim of the fountain, gasping for breath. "Accio dagger," he whispered, and the moonstone dagger flew right to his hand, hilt falling into his palm with a snap. With a start, he realized that he had proven one of his greatest fears untrue without even noticing: the talon wand could cast spells against Aunt Bella.

It was vital that it could, as she made quick work of the two statues and brought her whip towards him. He could see shock on her face once he struck back the whip towards her, the whips locking together, before Draco magically threw the dagger in her direction. He pushed for a second wind, willing every dam to loosen on the talon wand that had ever been. He

called Accio dagger once it had embedded in her leg. It flew back out and she fell to her knees, gripping at the puncture wound in her thigh.

"Serpensmorta!" he screamed, with exactly the intricate winding and slashing motion she had once spent three days teaching him to perfection.

The difficulty with using Bellatrix's favorite dark magic on her, though, was that she knew the counter-curses. The snakes wound about around her neck, but not her hands and feet underwater. She called "Vipera relashio!" without even blinking, before springing forward in a lunge on all fours like some creature crawled up from under the water right out of hell, bleeding by the leg into the fountain.

They cast Stunners at the same time. The red lights flew out and strained at one another in the air before exploding, sending them crashing back into opposite ends of the wrecked fountain. Coins scattered and rebounded into Draco's back as he smashed down, head falling against the edge, a broken piece of golden house elf falling against his ankle-

"Glacius!" she yelled.

In a trail that seemed at once instant and slow as the unfurling of centuries, a line cut through the water freezing into pure ice, and exploded into the water around him, freezing both of Draco's hands underwater. Draco tried to pull it out, but Bellatrix had moved faster than he thought she could, running limping at him and letting loose the bright red light of Expelliarmus.

The ice broke, wand hand freed, and then the other, from the two wands ripping their way out through to Bellatrix. His hands flew to the blocks of crushed ice at his side, and she yelled Accio dagger before he could grab it. It soared to her hand as well, which she grasped along with Father's wand in her right hand and-

The talon wand in her right. Which she had disarmed from him in a duel most unequivocally to the death, and she was not screaming. Her palm was not burning. She seemed pleased, even, by the icy feel of the wand in her hand. "Dantanian," she breathed, and pressed a kiss to the wand, though Draco could see a spark from it sizzle at her lips.

Then, reverie broken, she limped the last meter forward. She stopped his aborted attempt to scramble out of the fountain with his numb legs, grabbing him by the hair and jamming the talon wand right against his throat. "There! There we are! I told you! I told my whore nephew I would have it back! Tell me! Where is the cup from my vault? Tell me where it is! Tell me!"

Draco kept hoping for rescue to come from somewhere, anywhere, but it wasn't coming. If anything, the lights of spells and their explosions seemed further than when they'd first flown into the fountain. He'd been afraid Bellatrix would go after Sirius or the Longbottoms once he saw them, settling old scores, but his gesture of rare courage had been unnecessary, he knew now- he was the one she had been fixed on the most already. She had not sent that dagger as an idle threat.

In that brief respite between the Department of Mysteries and the Entrance Hall, she might have told the other Death Eaters to go after Sirius or the Longbottoms for her, try to kill them

even. But for Draco, she must have ordered them to help separate Draco from the others, to keep the fighting back and let her be the one to take her blood traitor nephew down for good...

Draco felt the bend of the talon wand against his voice box and then his jugular, digging in as vicious as a blade. "Tell me!"

Draco just laughed, letting his head fall back, and closed his eyes. He was almost relieved at the normalcy of the feel- the absolute rightness of it, unarmed once more beneath Aunt Bella as she spoke that all so familiar word Crucio-

But the spell did not hit Draco. There was none of the pain he had already tensed his limbs for, nothing but the pain already there. He opened his eyes, and it was Bellatrix who had fallen into the ruined water and begun spasming unnaturally, limbs going all directions like a broken marionette. Her nest of hair fell into her face as she yowled, feet jerking in the air before her back arched like it would break and she rolled to her side, sobbing. Draco remembered that feeling. No one, not even the Dark Lord, had ever in his experience quite cast Cruciatus like his Aunt Bella.

"Dantanian," Bella gasped, eyes rolling wildly back in their sockets. "No... *Dantanian...*"

Draco seized the fallen talon wand back into his hand. "Flipendo!" he yelled, and sent her flying out of the fountain he had been sure he would die in, with his last achievement to improve the Ministry of Magic's aesthetic standards. She fell convulsing to the ground. He recovered both wands and the dagger before leaping down after her.

His ankle turned and he fell atop her, feeling her still shaking before he rolled away, letting out retching sobs from water he hadn't even realized had gone into his lungs. He brushed away blood and ice and pushed his wand into her neck, her own curse still rebounding on her. The talon wand had not forsaken him after all.

"You!" Draco hacked out, struggling to get his voice to keep working out of a throat that felt cauterized and cracked. "You, Aunt Bella! *You* tell *me*- tell me what this wand is- tell me what you know- Dantanian Noir, Mother said- *you* said- tell me what that means, what's wrong with this wand, or I'll cast the Killing curse- I don't care that you're my blood, I've done it before, I *will* kill you-"

Bellatrix was still vibrating from the brutal Cruciatus, though that might just be aftershocks. Tremors from a Cruciatus like hers could linger for hours or days after. "Kill me, then!" she laughed, "Kill me!" and he raised his wand with a shaking hand.

"Sectumsemp-"

"SIRIUS!"

Remus's scream drew Draco's attention, and his gaze and wand hand jerked up as he finished the word. Dark marks ripped across the wood, tearing it to tracks of splinters, rather than hitting Bellatrix. In the distance, Draco could see Sirius and Remus, alone, clumped away from all the others in white. You could tell the sides apart in a single glance, with the Death

Eaters all in black robes, and DA and the Order in the wedding party's Muggle clothes of sullied white. There were two Death Eaters down on the ground between Sirius and Remus, unmoving. But Sirius and Remus were down as well, separated, with their wands banished halfway to Draco, and a single Death Eater standing between them-

"Sirius!" Draco yelled, and ran. He half-expected Bellatrix to somehow curse him in the back, but he had three wands on him, and then five once he picked up Sirius and Remus's, five whole wands he nearly dropped. He shoved the excess in his pockets. Only the talon wand stayed in hand, as his exhausted legs sent him those last few fated meters, driven past endurance to change the blue loop, to turn back what had been done. He saw his uncle in the suit he had been married in, that he was about to die in, unconscious on the ground, while Remus scrambled to save him and fell over the bodies between. Remus screamed as he crumbled on top of Dolohov, snowdrop glittering on his hand in the Ministry's brilliant overhead lights, as he reached out in vain towards Sirius-

The Death Eater above Sirius brandished his wand and then moved it in the air. It was a deep, gravelly voice that began, "Avada-"

"SECTUMSEMPRA!"

Instead of green light to pour out over Sirius, it was blood. It was not Sirius's own.

Draco shoved the hemorrhaging red form aside with his foot, barely seeing him in his haste to drag a bloodied Sirius away. "Remus!" he called, and once he dragged Sirius down the hall and to the side, so far the body was out of sight, he did the same for Remus, tunnel vision on getting his uncles to safety. Then he fell gasping beside them, his last energies spent. "He was casting the Killing curse... the wands... here," he groaned out, and threw out all five wands on the wood before them to let them find their wands.

He turned aside and hacked for breath, not from panic but sheer overexertion, so nauseous he could throw up or more likely pass out, air barely coming. He reached past what he now knew was Naufragiam, found a vial of draught of peace that had somehow made it unbroken too, and unstoppered it. He downed it, though half of it ended up all over him.

Remus seized his wand with Sirius still unconscious. He cast Enervate, with Sirius slow to wake from the Stunning spell. Remus cupped his face lovingly, pressing a kiss to his mouth once he had woken, tears in his eyes. "Sirius," he gasped, "Sirius, I thought you were dead- thought you had left me- thank you, Draco, *thank* you-"

"Dumbledore! It's Dumbledore!" a panicked voice yelled, which Draco would always have known as Mr. Crabbe's. He yelped in much the same tone he had used to yell Draco's name, when he found Draco goading Vince to wreck Mrs. Crabbe's rosebushes during Quidditch games.

"Dumbledore," Remus gasped, falling back against the wall. "We're saved. Dumbledore's here, we've won..."

And Draco, barely half-conscious, could lie between his uncles and listen to the sound of Death Eaters falling one by one, as Dumbledore arrived with a half-dozen stragglers who had

finally escaped the wedding. They helped win the day, while Draco buried his face in Remus's chest and began to sob.

He did not know how much time passed before there were hands on him, pulling him away from Remus and up to his feet. "DRACO! Draco, are you alright? Oh my God, Draco, you weren't moving- I thought you were dead," Harry gasped, and when Draco forced his tear-swollen eyes open, he could see Remus helping Sirius to his feet, while Harry stood with Dumbledore tall and untouchable behind him, Kingsley Shacklebolt and Tonks and Moody, and Hermione and Ron and Luna with Neville's arms around her and more. There were so many people emerging into the Ministry, green lights coming to life as the Floos began to work again, witches and wizards pouring in with a great cacophony of voices that Draco had somehow failed to so much as notice.

From the sound of it, those new arrivals had been graced by the sight of Voldemort, who had not left the Ministry after the Department of Mysteries as Draco had thought. "He was there!" a ponytailed man was shouting. Draco remembered him as an Auror he'd fought in third-year, though he couldn't remember his name. He was yelling at an ashen, devastated-looking Cornelius Fudge, who did not look to have any idea what had become of the Ministry. "I saw him, Mr. Fudge, I swear it was You-Know-Who, he grabbed a woman and Disapparated!"

So Voldemort had waited there wounded, perhaps nearby, and retreated when he saw for sure the day was lost. And taken Bellatrix. She would be honored, if she survived the punishment.

"I know, Williamson, I know, I saw him too!" Fudge whimpered incoherently, still in pajamas under his pinstriped cloak. "Merlin's beard- here- here!- in the Ministry of Magic!- great heavens above- it doesn't seem possible- my word- how can this be-?"

"Draco," Harry demanded, and Draco's gaze swung back to those beautiful green eyes that he had not lost after all, eyes that had led them undaunted out of hell. Somehow they had won, they had survived-

"I'm fine," Draco said shakily.

Harry gasped like he was so happy he could cry, pulling Draco tightly against him, holding him up, when he could not have fully stood on his own.

"Oh, God, Draco," Harry whispered, mouth to his ear, "I love you, I love you so much..."

"I love you too," Draco said, loud enough for not just Sirius and Remus but Cornelius Fudge to start and turn.

He leaned in and kissed Harry with everything he had left in him, and the hall fell silent.

He thought it was for the sight of the Boy Who Lived and the Malfoy heir. He drank in the feeling of Harry's lips after so terrible a night, pulling Harry back to him like his lifeblood. The world around them could have gone up in flames, and he still would have wanted to drown in Harry, to throw everything there was left of him into loving him. But there was not fire around them, only silence. Every second of contact was almost a return back to heaven, but the quiet around them was ghostly and unbroken-

Draco pulled back from Harry to see two of the Mediwizards, who had arrived to the scene in their robes of bright lime green, carrying a bloody body forward to the center of the hall, into the light to examine. But there was no need. The black robes, slashed open with blood, left a trail over the wood floor behind them. The wrinkled old face was frozen in an empty look of eternal pain, eyes open and vacant.

"Do something!" Fudge cried out in hysterical alarm. "That man is bleeding- Cantankerous? *Cantankerous*! Help him, he'll bleed to-"

"Cornelius," Dumbledore said calmly, voice ringing through the hushed hall, "There is no help for him now. Mr. Nott is dead."

Two Letters

Chapter Notes

Playlist

"Theo, there isn't anything I can say. There isn't anything I could ever say to change what happened. But I have to tell you at least that I'm sorry-"

A crumpling sound, and then another crumpled piece of paper being opened. Draco pressed his face more firmly against his silver pillow, keeping his eyes closed.

"Theo, I know your father was your best friend. And I know he was the only family you had left. He was never anything but kind to me, even after I turned on his side. He didn't deserve to die. But there was a battle, and-"

Crumpling, rustling.

"Theo, I think you have to know by now that it was me who killed your father. I'm admitting it here in writing, anyway, so you won't just read it in the Prophet. I owe you that much-"

Crumpling, rustling.

"Theo, whatever anyone says, I didn't cast Avada Kedavra on your father, I cast a cutting curse, and they said he bled to death while the battle carried on, not that it excuses-"

Crumpling, rustling.

"Theo, you'll never accept any apology, nor should you, but at least you should know the truth. Here is an account of the events that unfolded the night of June 21- a pity you ended this one here. Such an account would have been educational for myself as well."

"Severus?" Draco said drowsily, opening his eyes and sitting up. Sure enough, there was his godfather in his usual plain black robes, a sparse and foreboding silhouette against the room's Patronus-blue. Severus was perched not a meter away on the side of his bed, reading aloud the discarded attempts at letters to Theo. "Severus, what are you doing here?"

"You only ask me this now?" Severus asked dryly. "I would have thought you on high alert after those events the last letter referenced. I am here, naturally, to speak to you of them."

"I thought I was dreaming," Draco said, rubbing his eyes and adjusting his hoodie. "You're not here to take me back to Hogwarts?" He had been three days here waiting for the call back.

"Surely," Severus said coolly, "You must see that is impossible, given the circumstances."

Draco leaned over and snatched up the pile of failed letters to Theo, before throwing them in the air and burning the parchment before an unimpressed Severus's eyes. The glow of the flame lit up the dark circles under Severus's eyes, and Draco recoiled, heart constricting in a way he could hardly bear. "You- you were tortured, that's why you're only coming here now- you were with the Dark Lord, and he was angry because of me-"

"Not because of you," Severus said dryly. "Because his plans had failed- which, yes, had a good deal to do with you, but do not take all the credit. He was angry over the loss of the prophecy, and because of your fascinating cousin, in whom he has taken quite an interest-"

Draco slid to the side of the bed, grabbing onto the sheets. "Severus, please, tell me-"

"Let us exchange information," Severus intoned, and Draco could only stare at the dark half-moons at his nails. Everything had gone back to normal, it seemed. Umbridge had been fired, Dumbledore was vindicated and reinstated, and Severus was still being tortured.

"Was it Aunt Bella? Her Cruciatus is worse," Draco blurted. He realized his slip a second later, and thought to add that he thought so because of seeing it cast on Harry. But Severus seemed too tired to question it. "Severus, I'm so sorry-"

"If you wish to assist me, Draco," Severus said coldly, "You will kindly *cease lying*."

Draco's heart pounded. "What?"

"You told the authorities, up to Dumbledore himself, that it was your Aunt Bellatrix who you confronted at the top of the tower, and drew out the information about the attack from. *Bellatrix* who penetrated the wards and set the Black castle defenses on the wedding along with the Dementors. This was a lie."

"Mother," Draco said, tasting bile in his throat. "You saw Mother. She was with the Dark-"

"She has taken the Dark Mark," Severus informed him, and Draco slid off the bed to the floor and began to cry. Severus let out a snort of disgust, sitting down beside him to shake his shoulder roughly. "What did you expect, with her husband sent to Azkaban mysteriously missing a hand? Your father failed in his mission, and *someone* in your family must make atonement for that failure. With her work at Citadelle Xaphan, she was declared a full Death Eater."

"No," Draco gasped, covering his face. "No, not Mother..."

"And you tried to protect her," Severus observed. "You little fool. Do you not think it vital to know who successfully attacked your little friends? Who is capable of breaching House Black defenses? When the Order's headquarters, where *you* currently reside, is a Black property-"

"I know," Draco gasped, "I know, I know, I just... she said she *had* to, that she was the only one who could get in, because I blasted Aunt Bella off the family tapestry, and that blocked

her- I'm going to have to blast Father and Mother..."

"That knowledge will add to the Order's peace of mind," Severus commented mildly, "And I suspect they will understand your desire to protect your mother. I have omitted the information that you tortured her for the information on the attack."

So it had all emerged in front of Voldemort and Bella. Bad enough that the papers had been full of details of the Battle of the Ministry. Allusions to 'the only casualty, the elderly Cantankerous Nott, felled by a curse by a Slytherin combatant on the other side' had been about as blatant as putting a photograph of Draco in with Murderer written on his forehead. No one in the Ministry had any intentions of pressing charges, viewing it as self-defense after Draco had for once told the truth, backed up by Sirius and Remus.

But that did not change the fact that everyone knew Draco was unequivocally the killer of at least one Death Eater now, probably assuming Pettigrew too in retrospect. And anyone who had looked at reports of Father's maiming might also have suspicions there, though Father had refused to speak of who had done it, before being taken unceremoniously off to Azkaban...

"Draco, are you listening?"

"I'm just trying to figure out what everyone knows now," Draco said tunelessly, "About everything I did," and Severus let out a mirthless chuckle, shaking his shoulder more gently. It was unlike Severus, to sit with him companionably on the floor like this. Draco had to appreciate the compassion, especially for a godson in red Arsenal pajamas.

"I will not tell anyone," Severus promised, "About what you did to your mother. But you must give me your account of the 21st. It seems you had... an eventful day."

"Okay," Draco said, and took a deep breath. "But you have to promise to tell me what's up with Luna after. No one from Hogwarts has written me-"

"They were forbidden. Owl post is no longer safe, nor is communication by Floo. I came by Portkey, and will not stay for long. But yes, I will catch you up with news, if you do the same. There seems little point anymore, Draco, to any concealment. Not between us."

Draco pushed back a pang at that news, that Severus would abandon him soon, and began his story. "Okay, so here's how it happened. The wedding went just as planned for a while. I was at the reception for a while, then I left it and went off into the castle, and Harry followed me, when-"

"Why did the two of you go off alone at night?"

"What, do you think I lured him off to be kidnapped again?" Draco asked sourly. "I suppose it must rather seem like that, huh?"

"No, Draco," Severus said crisply, "But if it was by anyone's *suggestion* that the two of you were conveniently isolated, we must know at once-"

"It wasn't, we were just having a fight. Because- because he danced with Ginny Weasley." Severus let out a contemptuous snort. Draco glared at him weakly before going on. "While we were fighting, I saw Mother up on the tower, and thought she was Aunt Bella. But then I heard Mother cast Piertotum Locomotor, to activate the castle, and then the Dark Mark, and that seemed the signal for the Dementors to come. And the spell to bring the gargoyles to life brought down a lot more of the ruins... some of them hit Harry and knocked him out, but the charmed opal necklace Theo gave me for my birthday protected me..."

"How very bitter," Severus said quietly, "That irony would seem to Theodore Nott now."

More tears began to fall from Draco's eyes, and Severus pressed a vial of draught of peace on him before he continued. "I lost the necklace at the Department of Mysteries- Father took it, or maybe he just threw it, I don't remember- but it was just a protective talisman- anyway, Harry fell, and I cast a Patronus and made the Dementors leave, but that just let Father go and take him. I saw him Apparate away with him, so I went to the tower-"

"To interrogate your aunt about Potter's whereabouts?" Severus frowned, and Draco said nothing. "Ah," Severus said after a moment. "You went to kill her."

"But it was Mother," Draco said, trying to speed past this part, "And she explained what she'd done, and I cast Cauterizo on the talon brand on her hand, until she told me the full plan. So I bound her on the top of the tower and took her wand, but she must have escaped, I don't know how. I left the tower and found Luna and Hermione, and we all went to the Ministry to stop Father, except we sent Neville to get help. And we found Father and everyone, and Ron had this plan where I pretended to have changed sides, and got Harry to get the prophecy for Father- it had to be him- but I cast Cauterizo and made Father drop it, and it shattered, and I disarmed Father and took his wand, and then Harry- are you writing this down?" Draco stopped in disbelief. "What, are you planning a feature for the Prophet?"

"These events are of vital importance," Severus intoned, not looking up from his notebook. "Perhaps more than you know." Draco suspected he would be going straight to Dumbledore with them. Maybe they had thought Draco would be more forthcoming with Severus.

"Fine. Do you want me to go on? Harry decided we should all blow up the shelves of prophecies, so we did, and ran- but I got separated from the others, and Father caught me, he tried to choke me, and-" Draco looked away. He had been over this a hundred times in his head, but he was only saying it aloud now, which made it real. At least it felt like Severus was the only person on the planet he would *not* prefer to die sooner than tell. "But I got the better of Father, and I- I cast Cauterizo on him until his hand burned off, and then I Stunned and left him. But the Death Eaters found us, and then the students, and I got them all with me and I cast Protego Diabolica-"

"So indicated the other students' accounts. But I could still scarcely believe it. Should I even *ask* how you managed to produce such an incredibly powerful and dangerous piece of dark magic on command, in such a dangerous situation?"

"You'd probably be happier if you didn't."

"Very well. Continue."

"So we waited for help, but the Dark Lord came and broke the circle. Harry shot fire at him, but it just hit the Death Eaters. And Luna went up and started talking to him, and then she threw Naufragiam in his face- that's what you want to know about, isn't it, Severus, the Naufragiam-"

"Finish your story first," Severus said, with a tightness in his voice that indicated how very much he indeed wanted an explanation for the Naufragiam.

"And Hermione got us all to the lift, and then we made it to the entrance hall and ran for the other lifts. We saw Neville had brought Sirius and Remus, but Aunt Bella led the Death Eaters- not Father, not the Dark Lord- out a secret way, and then everyone was fighting. Aunt Bella got me alone and we dueled. She-" Draco swallowed, more than his pride smarting, as his eyes stung worse at the memory. "I tried, I tried so hard, I used dark magic and everything, but she beat me- but then she tried to use the talon wand on me, and it rebounded her Cruciatus back on her- and I was going to cast Sectumsempra on her-"

"To kill her?"

"Yes," Draco said nervously. Severus did not look disturbed. If anything, he seemed rather gratified.

"I see you did listen to our discussion earlier this year, about the merits of Sectumsempra over Avada Kedavra. Although at times, a Stunning spell will suffice, and prevent-"

"Not with Mr. Nott," Draco said, mouth gone dry. "He was already casting the Killing curse. I had to be sure it would take him down. And Sectumsempra, you just *point*- I heard Remus yelling- he and Sirius were disarmed, Sirius was stunned, Nott was going to kill him, I heard him say Avada, so I left Aunt Bella- I didn't think she'd escape, I'm sorry- and I killed Nott to save Sirius. I know what you must think of that-"

"No, Draco," Severus said softly, and squeezed Draco's shoulder. "Whatever personal issues will always remain between myself and Black, this is a war. He *is* a skilled combatant, and a resource for our side. You made the right choice."

"I got Sirius and Remus out of the way, and I was too exhausted to do anything else. You know the rest," Draco finished, and then dragged himself up, a mammoth effort, to go to the large trunks that Severus had brought for him. "Does this have all of my things, sir?"

"I packed them myself," Severus intoned, "So you may be sure of it."

The realization Severus would not trust any of Draco's dormmates with his things felt cold, but he shouldn't be surprised. What, had he expected *Theo* to do it?

He wanted to ask how the Slytherins were taking what Draco had done, how Theo was doing, but he didn't have the courage. He should just be happy that it looked like all of his invisible ink notebooks were there.

"Here," Draco just said, and went through his meticulously packed bags, inwardly wincing at the thought of Severus seeing how many books he had on Grindelwald, before finding *Moste*

Dark Blood Rituals of the Demon Goddess Hecate. "Here it is, the book we used for the Naufragiam. I don't know what Luna's told you." Draco rifled through the pages, sitting beside Severus again, and opened it to the page. He handed it to Severus, who just looked at the word Naufragiam, and put a marker in the page and put it aside. "It was me and Luna, we made it in fourth year for Harry."

"Miss Lovegood has given a narrative of its creation to the Order, as well as to Potter," Severus said, and Draco's heart sank. "I will confirm it with you. She says that in the early spring of 1995, you enlisted her help in the protection of Harry Potter against dark forces, which you feared would attempt to use the Triwizard Tournament as an opportunity to hurt or kidnap him."

"Yes, sir. I told you I was worried about that, too," Draco was so bold to say.

"Ah, yes," Severus said dryly. "With Karkaroff. And because I did not listen, you brewed a secret potion using blood magic with your then *thirteen*-year-old cousin, and used it to secretly poison the *Boy Who Lived*?"

Draco wrapped his arms around himself. "Please, Severus, if you're angry at me, just leave me alone. I'll tell Remus or someone later, I can't stand it when you're angry, not you..."

"Calm yourself, vain boy," Severus said, tapping at his shoulder roughly. "We are past all that now. This only matters going forward for the effects it may have on the Dark Lord. Miss Lovegood said you completed the potion successfully according to the instructions, that you administered it to Potter before the Third Task, and the reason that Potter was still drawn off by the Portkey was because *you* were the one to reactivate it- she told of your adventures deactivating it, yes- and you drew Potter in. She kept the remainder of the Naufragiam, and when Granger was told of it this winter, she formed a plan based on the Dark Lord having taken Potter's Naufragiam-laden blood."

"That's all of it," Draco said tiredly, and Severus eyed him unreadably.

"How did you even secure Potter's blood with him being unaware?"

"Dueling lessons," Draco sighed. "I was giving him dueling lessons. That's why I agreed to them in the first place, because I knew I'd need it."

"And where," Severus said, picking up *Moste Dark Blood Rituals of the Demon Goddess Hecate,* "Did you even secure this... this..." He seemed unable to find words for a book like this.

"The Restricted Section at Hogwarts."

"How did you get it?" Severus asked darkly. "I have not given you permission in years, and I have warned all of the other professors consistently *against* giving you-"

"Harry took it out for me."

"I should have known." Severus pinched his forehead, before rubbing his weak eyes, face sallower than ever. He truly looked exceptionally worn-down. Draco's mind went to what Bellatrix and Voldemort must have done to him. It put a choking sensation at the bottom of his throat that threatened to draw tears again. He tried to just push the images away.

"Luna?" Draco asked, and listened in a bit of a daze to Severus explaining the safeguards they intended to set up for the Lovegoods, namely guards and an Order safehouse.

"The Dark Lord was most displeased," Severus told him, "With everyone who had known of the Lovegood girl, of her history with the Tom Riddle diary as well as her association with you, and not informed him previously." One could only hope the Dark Lord had not learned that Luna called Severus her *godcousin.* "The Dark Lord and his most faithful followers seem to have made it a personal mission to make a public example of Miss Lovegood, for the humiliation she so unexpectedly inflicted on him. And, I suspect, for calling him Tom."

"I can't believe the Dark Lord has it in for *Luna*."

"You have," Severus observed, "Trained up your cousin... strongly, it would seem. And your Muggleborn best friend, for her to have concocted such a plan-"

"You won't tell anyone, will you?" Draco asked suddenly. "That Hermione was the one with the idea for Luna- or what the Naufragiam is, what it does-"

"Draco Lucius Malfoy," Severus said silkily, "Are *you* questioning *my* allegiances now?"

Draco drew his knees to his chest. "No, Severus. I'll never, I just don't ever know how much you can ever say or do, being a spy- what you have to, to keep your cover- I don't want to blow it- but- I suppose it doesn't matter, right? You can't go back to the Dark Lord. Not after what I did. You're my godfather, they'll make you suffer for it-"

"That," Severus said heavily, "Is the other issue to address before I take my leave. Get up."

Draco pulled himself to the bed again. Forebodingly, Severus stood. It highlighted the slight but ever-present tremor to his hands, which Draco knew personally was hell on Potions brewing. But it had never seemed to affect Severus's work in either timeline.

"Draco," Severus said, with the sound of a pre-prepared speech, "I told you at the start of the year that the Dark Lord was considering you as a potential recruit. Needless to say, this has changed. He now regards you as one of *the* greatest threats to him, and will target you accordingly."

"Me?" Draco said disbelievingly, but there was no hint of a smile on Severus's face. All the levity seemed to have died in the world with Cantankerous Nott, along with that preposterous name.

"Yes, you," Severus said dryly, "The lover of Harry Potter. You, who defied the Dark Lord twice to his face, cast the spell to destroy the prophecy he had dedicated a year to attaining, led the mission to foil his plot at the Ministry, and got eleven of his followers put into Azkaban. You, who wields the talon wand... who cast Protego Diabolica, a spell invented and

only known to be publicly executed before in such fashion by one Gellert Grindelwald, whom he has heard your Slytherin yearmates have nicknamed you after... You, to whom he *solely* attributes the blame for the Naufragiam, as Luna is, of course, *your* cousin. *You*, who has been the only one since his return to kill *one* of his Death Eaters, let alone two- the one who brought him back to life, and then one of his very oldest followers. And you *wonder* at this?"

The torrent of facts sunk into Draco's mind and left him even more numb. Put all together, it sounded impressive, except throughout it all, he had almost never had any idea what he was doing. "But what does that have to do with you, Severus?"

"It is as you say, that you have shown your hand with the Dark Lord," Severus said without expression, "But I will continue on as a spy with the Death Eaters." Draco cried out, hands going to his mouth, and Severus laughed. "So infernally dramatic to the end. Even if Dumbledore did not think it vital I carry on, I would regardless. So when he makes his move on you, I will be able to see it coming, and stand in the way of the blade."

"So you can die instead?" Draco exclaimed, grabbing onto Severus's arm stubbornly like some kind of security blanket. Severus did not attempt to shake it off, but nor did his face change.

"It was a figure of speech," Severus said coldly. "Only that it is in your best interest, my burdensome godson, that I keep myself as *close* to the Dark Lord as I can-"

"No, Severus, you shouldn't keep spying, you can't, we're too tied together- not after what I've *done*-"

"It is not my choice, Draco," Severus said coldly. "And you are sixteen now. That is old enough that you must surely see it comes down not to any personal feelings, but to survival-"

"But why does it have to be you?" Draco pleaded. "You need to tell Dumbledore you're going to stop-"

"I am doing," Severus said, more coldly yet, "My *duty*, as must we all-"

"You shouldn't have to! Dumbledore is asking too much-"

"Do not speak as if you understand-"

"I understand that you're being used, and I'm the only one who cares if you're safe-"

"Do not presume," Severus snapped, voice rising, "To cast judgment on me-"

"I'm not judging you, I'm judging *him*!" Draco yelled, own temper snapping like a rubber band. "I'm judging the Order of the fucking Phoenix! I'm judging everyone who's fine sending you off to get tortured for them and still treats you like an outsider! Haven't you suffered enough-"

"You are very young," Severus growled, "To speak as an authority on *suffering*-"

"I just don't want *you* to suffer! Is that so wrong? Severus, please, I just don't want you to die-"

"Who says I am going to-"

"If you keep spying for Dumbledore, you *will*, Severus!" Draco screamed at the top of his lungs, and began to shake, hands convulsing impotently. "YOU ARE GOING TO DIE-"

"What is going on up here?" Sirius demanded, busting into the room along with Remus. He had his wand drawn at the sound of screaming, and looked ready to curse Severus at a moment's notice. Remus stepped between Draco and Severus, and after saving them, Draco wanted to cast Sectumsempra on them both.

"HE'S NOT GOING TO HURT ME!" Draco screamed. "I don't want him to keep going back to the Dark Lord, not after what I did- he'll *die* if he keeps doing this- none of you trust him, you all hate him, but they used the Cruciatus curse on him, *Aunt Bella* did because of me, and Voldemort *will* kill him- if not because of me, then- then because- but no, no one listens to me, no one *ever* listens to me-"

"I'm sorry, Draco," Severus said softly. "This is what must be."

"Draco," Remus said softly, "Draco, it's alright," and pulled Draco into his arms, drawing Draco's face down against his shoulder.

"It's not, it's not alright, nothing is alright," Draco gasped, breathing hard, and Severus walked out the door. "Severus, don't go back!" Draco screamed after him, and Sirius followed, the sound of loud footsteps on the stairs below them. "SEVERUS!"

"Ssh, Draco, you have to calm down, you have to breathe," Remus tried to soothe him.

"I can't, I can't breathe- I, I took the draught, but I still- I still can't breathe- he's going to die, Remus- everyone is going to die, and I can't save them- all I can do is kill-"

"Draco, you saved Harry," Remus soothed, stroking his back and sitting down with him. "You saved Sirius. You saved me. You are not a bad person. You are going to be fine, Draco. Severus will be fine. He's strong. Listen to me. Severus is so strong, and so are you. He will survive this. We can all survive this-"

"We *won't*!" Draco gasped, beginning to hyperventilate. He hadn't spoken much to Sirius or Remus recently, after Sirius's refusal to practice dueling with him had led to him doling out very harsh words. He'd been desperate after losing his duel to Bellatrix to get better, and Sirius had just said he needed rest. Remus had backed Sirius up, and Draco had been just as furious with him, but he didn't want either of them to *die*.

"You're going to die, Sirius will die, Severus will die," Draco gasped, tears falling again, feeling he would be sick, as he tried to follow the breaths Remus was directing him in. But they were coming double-time, even at Remus's steady rhythm. "So many people... *Dobby*... they're all going to die, and I won't be able- can't save-"

"Draco," Remus said, gripping his face and staring into his eyes, "That's not your responsibility," and Draco dissolved into full, heaving, incoherent sobs.

Remus stayed with him as he sobbed for what felt like hours. Once Draco exhausted himself, Remus helped Draco back under the covers, tucked him in, and turned out the light. Draco slept then, for a very long time.

"Mail," Sirius announced, dropping two letters in front of Draco on the afternoon of the 27th. "Apparently letters have been going to Hogwarts for you. They can't find you here, the Fidelius and all. Minerva passed these on. One's from the Ministry, looks important."

"Would you rather I open it, Draco?" Remus asked, and Draco shook his head. He tore it open anxiously, and read.

Mr. Draco Lucius Malfoy

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Highlands, Scotland

Wizengamot Administration Services

The Ministry of Magic

Whitehall Underground

SW1A 2ET

London, England

26th June, 1996

Dear Sir

Notice of Disownment

Information has been laid by Narcissa Black Malfoy of Malfoy Manor, Wiltshire, SP4 7DE, England

Before the Wizengamot

That between 2nd August 1991 and 21st June 1996 the dependent of the plaintiff completed the following acts of offence and severance from the guardianship of the plaintiff, namely

1. The theft of one wand, 12 and 3/4 inches, dragon heartstring core, walnut
2. The unlawful seizing of the contents of Vault 3101 at Gringotts Wizarding Bank, of lawful possession by House Black, by means of false representation
3. The unlawful tampering with family records of House Black
4. Participation in acts of sodomy
5. Residence outside the family domicile for a period longer than one year
6. Public association and residence with known sodomite Sirius Orion Black
7. Publication of false and libelous statements regarding the Malfoy family in the March 1996 issue of 'The Quibbler'
8. The confessed and publicly documented killing of family associate Cantankerous Abernathy Nott

In recognition of these claims, the Wizengamot has granted the request of the plaintiff to legally disown Draco Lucius Malfoy from her guardianship and the Malfoy lordship, estate, and properties. Furthermore, the plaintiff's former dependent is no longer entitled to the use of the name Malfoy. The Wizengamot requests the appearance of the former dependant to 1) register a guardian, 2) register as an emancipated minor, or 3) register as a ward of the state. Furthermore, the Wizengamot requests the former dependant to register to the Ministry of Magic census under a new surname-

"Take it," Draco said, throwing it down, and shoved it at Sirius and Remus, getting up and striding towards the stairs. "Keep it, burn it, I don't care."

"What is it?" Sirius asked, and Draco whirled on him, baring his teeth.

"Not a *surprise*."

"Draco, there's another letter," Remus said gently, before he and Sirius turned to the disownment letter.

Draco couldn't bear to watch them read it. Instead he stomped over to Remus, grabbed the second letter, and took it with him. He made it up to his room, locked and shielded himself inside, then ripped it open.

He didn't look at it as he did. If he had, he would have seen there was no return address. The envelope was suspiciously large and heavy, with a sharp-looking shape within. You could more properly call it a package-

Draco dropped it like it had Flagrante cast on it when he saw what was inside. He had seen this before. Once.

"Protego horribilis!" he cast, shoving the letter onto the floor, and began to shake.

The small, black-twined scroll unfurled itself, splitting a familiar seal in black wax apart. The wax fell away limply, beside the glint of the obsidian dagger with DRACO LUCIUS MALFOY over the canelure in blood red.

The handwriting was far better than Bellatrix's. Draco recognized it instantly, from so many classes in both timelines, along with any number of notes to set up clandestine meetings- and passionate letters, written in mirror writing in the blue loop.

The handwriting looked to be in blood, as was traditional. But it was a small, elegant, sweeping cursive nonetheless, as understated and refined as the writer himself. The words were another story.

I will never forgive this

and I will accept no restitution

but your life.

My father was my only family.

YOU TOOK MY FATHER FROM ME.

I loved my father.

YOU TOOK MY FATHER FROM ME.

I loved you.

YOU TOOK MY FATHER FROM ME.

WHORE

BLOOD TRAITOR

MURDERER

The dagger surged forward and stabbed viciously at Draco's shield. Draco watched it writhe black and almost serpentine in a trick of the light, clawing at the invisible force field trying to get at the accused. There was something hypnotic in it, something righteous, and right.

Finally, the dagger flew instead to the closest wall, where the painting of the Antipodean Opaleye hung, and carved out the three accusations over the flesh of the dragon.

DLB

Chapter Notes

Playlist

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"So am I being kicked out? For all the, like, murders and stuff? Because I've gotta say, I don't exactly have a backup plan-"

"Draco, don't joke about that," Remus said sharply. "I don't know how much it's really a joke from you. And please, sit. I promise, we haven't called you here for anything bad."

Draco took the seat requested across from them, on the living room couch, listening to Kreacher shuffle past grumbling, before they were alone and the adults could begin.

"You know," Remus began, "That you have to decide how to proceed, now that your mother has disowned you," and Draco regretted not being a child and refusing to come, barricading himself in his room if necessary. "If you recall, the letter from the Ministry laid out your options-"

"I'll become an emancipated minor, obviously," Draco bit out. "I'll be of age in less than a year. I should have applied to become one even before I got disowned." Each time he said the word disowned, it felt like another small stab. He told himself every time that he didn't care, and it never made it any more true. "And I'll get on that, I know I have to answer the Ministry, just- not today-"

"Will you listen for once?" Sirius groused, but to Draco's great annoyance, he was smiling. Remus was wearing robes, but Sirius had on Muggle clothing, like he always seemed to prefer now around the house. He looked so handsome and composed and well-built and together as a person, Draco almost found himself resentful of his uncle. Draco had been there as Sirius rebuilt himself from the ground up, while in the same period, Draco had burnt his own life down to the ground.

"We have something to say to you, alright?"

"I want you to understand how serious we are about this," Remus said, "And that we aren't just doing lip service to this possibility. Ultimately, Draco, it *is* your decision, and if you truly want to emancipate yourself, we will support you. But our preference would be this." He handed Draco a thick stack of papers. Draco felt his breath go, but not in the nausea of panic. It was the pernicious sweetness of something that had seemed impossible, suddenly simply existing before his eyes.

They were adoption forms.

"These," Draco said, mouth gone dry, trying to stay impassive. "These are..."

"Draco," Sirius said, reaching out and grasping his shoulder tightly, "I'm your uncle. Well, your first cousin once removed- I'm your blood family, and since you've been disowned, it only makes sense for *us* to adopt you. I want to name you legally as our adopted child and heir."

"But- *Harry*-" Draco began, feeling of betrayal cutting through tentative elation.

"This will not prevent us from adopting him as well," Remus said gently. "This is not a zero-sum game. I know it's been difficult for the two of you, but you need to understand there is room in this home and this family for both of you. I take it Sirius has spoken to you of Dumbledore's test for Harry, which he must pass in order to approve his adoption?" Draco nodded, and Remus smiled at him before launching into his explanations. Quite a bit, it seemed, Draco had missed by being home from Hogwarts.

"Dumbledore's return has expedited that for us. He already determined that the blood protection from Harry's mother extends to Sirius as his godfather, and myself as his magic-bound partner now. It only remains for Harry to pass the Occlumency test. He will stay with the Weasley family to work on preparation for it with Bill, who it turns out also has some expertise in the area. That weight is off your shoulders, Draco. Harry *will* take that test- we have it set for sometime in July- and we *will* formally adopt him-"

A greater weight oppressing Draco had to be given voice. "But- you said I would be your heir. Even if you adopt him? Shouldn't Harry be?"

"You *are* the heir to House Black, Draco, already," Sirius said impatiently, as if it was obvious. "Some would say you're its lord, though the house recognizes me and all. But you're already the heir at minimum. You know that, right?"

"You would not be taking anything away from Harry," agreed Remus. "He has the Potter fortune and name, while you have- forgive me, but- practically speaking, you have relinquished your claim to the Malfoy-"

"I have what I took from Aunt Bella, though," Draco blurted, and it was true. He had more gold than he knew what to do with, just sitting around Grimmauld, stolen but no less useful.

"We want you to have more than something stolen," Remus said, touching his other shoulder. It was incomprehensible, the intensity of both of them, as if this was not a mere obligation but something they actually wanted. "We want you to have the security you grew up with, a name and an inheritance and a family. Just a different one. And we want you to be able to truly call us your guardians. Your family." He smiled with a bit of embarrassment. "The legal intricacies will still need working out. Sirius's adoption of you is relatively straightforward, he's your blood, but given the lack of legal status for the marriage, *I* may not be able to *formally* adopt you. But I will apply to as well, Draco. I want you to consider *me* as doing so, just as much as Sirius."

"You don't," Draco began, and shut his eyes, doubt filling him. He couldn't bear to keep looking at those earnest Gryffindor faces, offering him the world, as if he didn't deserve

nothing but to be stricken from it. "You two don't have to do this, just because I killed someone for you. Or- since I helped with Sirius's freedom, and all that. You don't owe me anything-"

"When are you going to get," Sirius said roughly, shaking his shoulder, "That people value you for more than your power?" Draco opened his eyes, and Sirius looked downright annoyed, though Remus was giving him a look to calm down. "Seriously, Draco, it's getting old. Just because your self-esteem is shit-"

"Sirius-" Remus tried to interrupt, pained.

"And your worthless piece of shit of a father treated you like dirt-"

"Sirius-"

"And *you* think no one has the right to love you, doesn't mean no one *does* love you-"

"Sirius-"

"*I* love you, you great oblivious plonk of a nephew-"

"*Sirius*-"

"*We* love you, and we want you to be part of our family. Whatever we have to do to prove that to you, we'll prove it," Sirius went on, giving him another shake, snowdrop on his ring pressing into Draco's shoulder. "So get the fuck out of your head, stop being self-pitying, and stop pretending no one cares about you! We care! We would do anything for you, Draco, and that's not *conditional.* We're your *family*-"

"Sirius!" Remus yelled, and Sirius sat back with a sigh, only to have Remus push him further, sitting him firmly down on the couch. Then he turned, far more composed than anyone else in the room, and smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry about this big old yappy dog over here- no, Padfoot, *hush*- and of course, we'll give you some time to consider it- this is not an easy decision, and-"

"I want you to," Draco blurted, "I want you to adopt me," and then clamped a hand over his mouth, wanting to sink into the floor and disappear. What if this had all been a performance, just a token offer they hadn't thought he'd take? They were going to be horrified to hear him actually say yes-

"Really, Draco?" Remus asked, smile widening, and Draco nodded.

"I- I want that," Draco breathed, hands going to Remus's arm to clutch onto it. He was putting himself out on a limb, but somehow, stupidly, he found himself almost believing them. "I want- I want to be a family." He bit his tongue hard, at the feeling of the back of his eyes pricking, because now was not the time for tears, not even happy ones. Not anymore. However overwhelming it was, to have one family throw him away, and another one want to pick him up off the rubbish heap. "I mean, given what I did to my *last* set of parents, I don't know if you understand the ramifications of your decision, but-"

"Draco, we know you can be a nightmare," Sirius said bluntly. "You're *my* nephew, of course you're difficult sometimes. And of course you've got shit, you're a Black. Remus says I can be a nightmare too. That doesn't mean he didn't stand up in front of the world anyway and say he wanted to marry me. Now he wants to stand before the world and call you his family."

"Oh," Draco breathed, covering his mouth, "*Oh*," and his shoulders shook.

He didn't think he was going to cry, but something was shaking him, like a wave rolling through him, some momentous change at the root of him. Then Sirius had stood up and hugged him. He pulled Remus to join them, and Draco fell into their embrace. *They want me,* he thought incredulously, *They really want me in their family,* and it would perhaps take some time to fully believe that.

But Draco was not about to give them the chance to change their minds. "I want to do it," he said brusquely, shoving them back after a long moment. "Let's fill out the forms."

The stumbling block was that, at the moment, there was no correct name to fill in for the name of the new dependent. Sirius fished through the stack and found the change of name forms that Remus had not failed to remember, but Draco was left staring at them blankly until Sirius said, "Do you want to be Draco Black? I know it's your mother's maiden name, and she's the one who disowned you, but you *are* a Black, and one day you'll be Lord Black. Going by that name makes that clear to everyone-"

"I just- you want me to be?" Draco asked, with a shyness he found embarrassing in himself, and got his shoulder shaken again by Sirius.

"Yes!" Sirius exclaimed. "Have you listened to a word we've said?"

"Okay," Draco said, and smiled to himself as he lifted the quill and filled in the nearest section to it: the signature of his initials. *DLB*, he wrote with a flourish, only to look up at the dismayed noises Sirius and Remus made. "What? Were you just fronting about the Black thing-"

"No, Draco," Remus said gently. "Of course it's your choice, if you want to keep the same middle name..."

Draco stared down at the L that had simply appeared there. *Draco Lucius Black. DLB.* What had he been thinking? If he was going to the trouble to change his name anyway, he might as well get rid of his father's name, the same way he had gotten rid of his father's hand.

But he had just always been Draco Lucius, because his father was Lucius, just like Father was Lucius Abraxas because his father was Abraxas. His hand had been automatic. *Draco Lu-*

"No, that works," Draco said, then jotted down under Full Name *Draco Lupin Black.* He looked up a second later at Remus, abashed at his presumption. "So even if it turns out you can't officially adopt me, your name is still there..."

"Draco," Remus said in disbelief. "You want Lupin in your name as well?"

"Um," Draco said weakly, wilting, "Yes?" and Remus seized him in another firm hug.

"I would be honored," Remus said, "For you to carry the Lupin name," and Draco smiled.

"Draco Lupin Black," he read out, and maybe in time, that name would seem like his own.

Draco was woken from a dream of trying to explain to a dagger-wielding Theo why his father wasn't really dead, by fingers stroking through his hair.

"Draco? Draco, wake up. I don't have much time..."

Draco opened his eyes to the sight of Harry Potter leaning over him, face close to his, for the first time since the floor of the Ministry of Magic, before the body was brought out. "Harry?" he said, blinking rapidly, trying to figure out which was the dream, Theo or Harry, green eyes or the body. "What are you doing here? Am I still at Grimmauld?" He panicked at the thought of Harry seeing the ruined painting, before remembering he'd stowed it out of sight in his closet, along with the two black daggers with his name on them, something of the beginning of a collection. But Theo's dagger, and the knowledge he had sent it, were Draco's only.

"A stop on the way to the Weasleys," Harry said, with a bright grin that it would be them instead of the Dursleys. "I made a fuss, and they agreed to let me come here and see you before we go there for the summer. At least until I take Dumbledore's test. Then, hopefully, I can be here... did Sirius and Remus explain it all to you? They want to adopt us both!" His gaze was half-disbelieving at that incredible prospect.

Draco nodded and yawned, and Harry chuckled. "Sorry," Draco said, mortified. "I was taking a nap..."

"Yeah, I know," Harry said affectionately, stroking his hair some more. "Remus said you've had to sleep a lot since you got back, exhaustion and all... I'm sorry, baby..."

"Baby?" Draco echoed, sitting up abruptly. Harry's eyes focused on him from closer as he leaned in, hands sliding to cup Draco's face.

"Is that bad?" Harry said softly. "You called me that once, remember, when you were pretending to be..." He broke off before saying the name. "What should I call you, then? If you meant it, when you said you love me, then I want to call you at least one name like that..."

"I meant it," Draco said, and watched Harry's face come alive with elation again. "But why- why would you want to, after what I-"

"What you did?" Harry finished. "Draco, you saved Sirius's life. You don't think that makes me like you *more*-"

"It's everything," Draco said, and tilted his head to get a good look at Harry. "You aren't here to break up with me? Just because you might live here, doesn't mean you can't. I wouldn't

make it awkward, even if it would be inconvenient. Oh, wait, it must be really inconvenient, my timing to out us at the Ministry, when you..."

If Harry was here to break up, he could have done Draco the courtesy of looking less gorgeous. His Muggle clothes were summer ones, light blue jeans and a plain red T-shirt that was fitted to him for once, showing off the muscles of his shoulders and bare biceps at nearly sixteen now, hair fully grown out, a year after he'd cut it so short. The overall effect was something that made it hard not to start mentally taking those clothes back off him. But Draco tried.

"No one really saw us," Harry said, frowning. "They were distracted, by the, uh..." He had the courtesy not to say *the body*, though they both knew what he meant. "It's not been in the Prophet or anything. And Draco- of course I'm not here to *break up with you.* You just said you meant it, that you *love* me. Don't you think I'm going to do everything in my power to lock this down?"

"Lock this down?" Draco echoed disbelievingly, sitting up and pulling away from Harry's hands. Harry's eyes dropped and lingered over Draco's bare torso, transparently gratified to find him sleeping in just his Arsenal joggers, now that each London day was growing hotter. Draco didn't make himself look like an idiot by getting modest and covering himself, but he couldn't help the heat it sent through him, to have Harry look at him like that. He was not so furtive anymore in its admiration. It was almost like Harry had the right to, and it was the most enticing and terrifying thing Draco had ever felt.

"Forget my bloodline-" Draco supposed if all would go well, it would soon count as *their* bloodline- "*You're* mad. You should be breaking up with me, you suicidal empty-headed Gryffindor." He saw Harry smile at the words, always so happy to be insulted by Draco. "I mean, for starters, we're going to be adopted brothers soon... I don't know if it's still okay for us to..."

"Key word there being adopted, right?" Harry said cheerfully. "Hermione said it's not like we grew up together. And that it's hardly incestuous by Black family standards, right?"

Draco wanted to kiss Harry so much he almost felt sick with it, but he forced darker words out. "And there's the small fact that I killed somebody *else*."

"I don't care," Harry said, and took his hand. Draco let him hold it, heart gone to his throat.

"I stole your *blood*-"

"Hermione's explained. The Naufragiam. We've worked it all out, you don't have to worry about anything," Harry said impatiently, as if that was just background noise. As if they could ignore the rest of the world and just choose each other, like Draco wasn't the worst possible thing in the world for Harry Potter.

"You just *accept* that?" Draco exclaimed. "I fed you a *blood magic potion* without your knowledge-"

"For my sake," Harry said, fingers stroking over Draco's palm. "Luna told me how hard you worked that year to *protect* me. I wish you didn't keep secrets, but I love that about you, how hard you to fight to protect the people you care about. Even- even me. And you're not going to scare me away-"

"It's not the only time I've done blood magic, not by far-"

"I don't care," Harry insisted, and pulled Draco's hand to his mouth and kissed the back of it, green eyes radiant above it.

"I know so much dark magic. More than you would even think. And I'm not going to stop-"

"I don't care," Harry said, with another kiss to his hand, and nuzzled against it.

"I've lied to you so many times. Kept so many secrets. And I'll have to keep more-"

"I don't care." That seemed Harry's new mantra, delivered each time with another kiss.

"I lied to you and everyone about who attacked the wedding," Draco tested him, and saw no surprise in his eyes. "But you've heard that. You know that it was really my mother, not Aunt Bella? And that I hurt my mother to find out where you were? I tortured my own *mother*-"

"I don't care."

"I burned off my father's hand. I didn't have to. I just *did* it. I cursed him until it was *gone*-"

"I don't care."

"There's something wrong with my wand. Mother said there was this name tied to it, something terrifying. It could change me, if it hasn't already- turn me bad- worse than I already-"

"I don't care."

"I'm more jealous than *you*, do you know that? I'm just better at hiding it. And I'm depressed and miserable, and honestly pretty reckless and violent, and generally fucked up beyond repair, so bad my own parents don't want me anymore-"

"I don't care. *I* want you-"

Draco pulled his hand from Harry's grasp, sitting up all the way and grabbing Harry's shoulders. He stared right in those gorgeous eyes so there could be no mistake. "I love you, you stupid bastard. I love you too much. I'm *obsessed* with you, and I never wanted to be. I've always wanted this feeling to go away, and it never has, no matter what I do, I just can't make it *stop*-"

"Then don't," Harry whispered, face full of such pure acceptance it was bewildering.

Maybe he really was mad. It had to be madness, pure and simple, to keep Harry here on his bed, offering himself, no matter how much Draco threw out to try and push him away.

"I want to do so many things with you," Draco admitted, voice hitching lower. "You can't imagine the things I think about doing to you..."

Harry's eyes lit up, sparking as he leaned closer. "Tell me," he said, looking the opposite of repulsed by that piece of information.

"I think about it," Draco whispered, "All the time, what it would be like... you and me..."

"To date?" Harry said, still so adorably innocent. "Publicly? To be boyfriends, for real?"

"We can have that, if you want, it's up to you," Draco said impatiently, and Harry grinned from ear to ear. But his grin disappeared, turning to something far less naive, at Draco's next words. "You can have whatever you want from me, do you get that? I mean it. *Anything*."

"I don't," Harry breathed, licking his very pink lips. The smell of him was filling Draco's lungs, that familiar shampoo and skin, that Amortentia-scented invitation. "I don't get it."

Draco was glad the covers were still between them. He could feel their knees brushing. He linked his hands around Harry's neck, looking him right in that unforgettable face, and heard himself say, "I think about it all the time. About doing it. You know, all the way."

Harry's teeth raked over his lower lip, pupils dilating and making his eyes darken. "Draco," he breathed, "If you think I don't think about that too, you really are mad..."

"I think about making you come," Draco admitted, and Harry let out a low moan at just the words. "I think of you *telling* me to make you come- to *serve* you... I think about you *fucking* me-"

Harry could not have looked less afraid of Draco's words. If anything, he was starting to look hungry, like when he wanted to drag Draco off and make out for as much time they could steal- but not just that anymore. "I want you any way I can get. I always have. I want-" He leaned close enough for Draco to feel his breath, foreheads resting together, the warmth of his skin an indelible brand. "You don't know how bad I want you-"

Draco kissed Harry, and Harry let out an anguished groan and kissed him back so hard it stung his mouth. Draco welcomed the lash of it, the ache like a testimony that Harry was here, was real, that he wanted Draco back. He pushed Harry off him, but only to sweep out the blankets from between them. Then he pulled Harry on top of him, grabbing onto Harry's back and arching up against him. "I'm yours," he gasped against Harry's mouth. "Everything you want, it's all yours," and wrapped his legs around Harry's waist, locking their bodies together.

Harry's hips rocked down, demonstrating neither of them were physically unaffected by the discussion. Draco rubbed back, and Harry ground down so hard, Draco saw *stars*. "Harry," he gasped, head arching back. Harry's mouth fell right on his throat, kissing him where he was most sensitive, where Harry knew it affected him the most. "Oh, fuck, Harry... Harry, I love you..."

Harry's hips moved again, athletic and strong, spurring their excitement higher, and Harry's hands went to Draco's hair like they so often did, tugging it to expose his neck entirely. "Say it again," Harry demanded, each word dragging his teeth right over the pulse point. "Say it. Say you love me."

"I love you, Harry," Draco gasped, "I love you," feeling like he was a second away from falling apart. And then Harry kissed his neck, and moved his hips again-

There was a loud knocking on the door, and Harry made the most inhuman sound of frustration that Draco had ever heard.

"*No*," Harry whined, long and desperate. "This can't possibly be happening..."

Draco laughed breathlessly as Harry's face fell onto the pillow. "You did tell me," Draco panted, "That you... mmm... that you were only allowed to visit- for a little while..."

"Harry? Draco?" Remus's voice called from outside. "Draco, you know the rule now, no magical locking or silencing charms for your room!"

"It's not locked," Draco called, "But don't come in!"

He pushed Harry off him, lying back and running his hands through his hair, trying to gather himself. But his body felt hot all over, like one great pulsing ache, that only Harry's touch, only that pressure could satiate, an itch nothing else could scratch...

"Sorry, boys, we're coming in," Sirius called. "Unless there's something in there that seeing would leave me scarred..."

"Stay out," Draco yelled, "Unless you want to be permanently scarred!" Harry groaned in mortification. Remus let out a distressed noise on the other side of the door, while Sirius burst out laughing. "Come on, Harry, get a hold of yourself..."

"I'm not the one who needs to be told that," Harry said hotly, eyes sweeping over Draco where he had sprawled back. They lingered between his legs, where the fabric of the joggers showed almost everything, all of the effect that Harry had on him. He couldn't help but smirk at Harry's appreciation. His body went languid and pliant under Harry's gaze, letting Harry devour him with his eyes now that his hands had to leave him...

"You're not helping!" Harry protested.

Eventually, once they had both gotten up and composed themselves, they were presentable enough to let in an embarrassed Remus and amused Sirius, who marched Harry off to go meet back up with the Weasleys, by way of Mundungus the chauffeur. Draco pulled on the nearest shirt and followed him barefoot down the stairs, watching his departing back with inevitable forlornness.

"I'll see you soon," Harry said, catching Draco's hand as they reached the door. The passage through so many glaring, murmuring House Black portraits was commonplace by now, and Draco barely registered their disapproval as they finally stopped by the door.

"You'll pass the test," Draco whispered, "And come to live here for good. And then we- well- "

"Yeah," Harry said, grinning at him like he had just been promised a ticket to the gates of heaven. "Yeah, then we can- yeah."

"Goodbye, Harry," Draco said, and kissed him on the lips, but only for a moment, with Sirius and Remus standing right there waiting.

In the distance, Mundungus Fletcher's horn was honking. Draco kissed Harry one last time, on the forehead, and then let him go.

"I know you must be sad to see Harry go," Remus told him at dinner that night, "But you know the most important thing is for him to be safe. For everyone to be safe."

"Yeah," Draco said, and made more of an effort to get down his potatoes. Kreacher was not always the world's greatest chef, but they were edible, at least. He thought of the five-course dinners for any remotely special occasion at Malfoy Manor, and found no ruefulness, only a distance, as if that had been a life that had belonged to another person. In a way, it had. That had been the life of a Malfoy. Draco didn't even have the name. Soon, he would officially become Draco Lupin Black.

"And of course," Sirius added, taking up the thread of discussion with his usual lack of tact, "There's one more thing we have to do for us really to be safe-"

"Sirius!" Remus snapped, and pulled his hand out from under the table where they'd been holding hands. "That can wait. Draco has been through enough today-"

"What is it?" Draco asked, and Sirius smirked at Remus, prompting a number of meaningful looks between them, in the private language only they seemed to speak. Draco didn't begrudge them it, or even wish he could understand it all. He had the feeling a lot of it would be too intimate for him. And it was a novel experience, to sit at the table with parents who actually seemed to *like*, let alone want each other-

That's who they are now, isn't it? My parents.

Finally, exchange concluded, Remus said, "There is the matter of the tapestry."

Draco swallowed. He'd known this was coming, though he hadn't been in any hurry to hasten it along. "I have to blast my parents off it, don't I?"

"It has to be you," Remus agreed. "You're the only one of our names on it that hasn't already been disowned. But there's more to it than just the blasting. Come and see, both of you."

Remus led them to the tapestry, and Draco's eyes went instinctively to the blasted place where Bella had been. But then Remus produced something from his pocket, and Draco took it, frowning. "What's this?" He opened the plain wood box, and found a very long, slender, ornate red quill. Remus took it and held it up proudly.

"This," Remus said, "Is how we change the tapestry. I've been doing some research over the past couple months in the Black library-"

"Shit!" Draco exclaimed, covering his mouth. "I *still* haven't figured out how to add you to the tapestry, Uncle Remus-"

"But I have, as I should have from the start. You have had far too much on your plate, already. You did your part and more with these." Remus held up his snowdrop ring fondly. "I figured out I would need a special quill made for the tapestry. So I contacted Scrivenshaft's in Hogsmeade to have it- why are you making that face?"

"Oh, no, I'm just, er, banned from there," Draco mumbled.

"What?" Sirius marveled. "How do you get banned from a *quill shop*?" he laughed, shoving Draco playfully. "Why are you like this, Frankenstein? Why?"

"Hey, I'm not banned from *that* many places," Draco complained.

That immediately backfired. "Where else are you banned from?" Remus asked.

Draco wilted under that frank stare. "Like, nowhere. Just, um, at Hogwarts. The Divination Tower and Gryffindor Tower... *anyway*! Let's do this." Draco turned to the tapestry with determination, before he made them change their minds about this whole adoption lark. "How does this work?"

"We have to be sure," Remus warned, "To do this all in the right order. Follow my instructions exactly, you two. I know you both too well to leave you to it yourselves. First, Draco, you can restore people to the tapestry with the quill. It's very simple. You just have to write their name again, where they were blasted from, and cast Filicida remittetur. They will appear again."

"I didn't even know it was possible to put people back," Sirius said, shaking his head, and watched with a wondering smile as Remus made Draco repeat the incantation, and then the wand motion. "It has to be you, it can only be someone active on the tapestry, Draco."

Draco responded to this by casting Diffindo on his palm, and smearing his blood over the talon wand. Which he patiently explained to Sirius and Remus as necessary with the tapestry, after suffering the inevitable freak-out.

"Okay, ready to come back?" Draco asked, poising the quill over Sirius's name, only to falter. "Wait, you'd never put Aunt Bella back on here, would you?"

Remus was the one to burst out laughing then, while Sirius rolled his eyes and poked at his shoulder. "Draco, we have seriously got to work on your trust issues."

"Okay, okay," Draco said, smiling brightly, and wrote Sirius's name. "Filicida remittetur," he said, and just like that, Sirius reappeared on the tapestry.

"Oh my God," Sirius breathed, grabbing onto Remus's shoulder. The sight seemed to affect him more than he had likely thought it would. "Remus, Draco, you did it. I... I'm back."

"Not just you!" Draco exclaimed excitedly. "Aunt Andromeda," he said, as he wrote out *Andromeda Tonks* atop her blast mark. He didn't know her, not really. But she had given him Imoogi. "Filicida remittetur!" She was back again too. "Let me see if I remember... here's your Uncle Alphard. Why don't we put him back?"

"We're putting everyone back?" Sirius asked, and Draco shrugged.

"Why not?" said Draco, "I have the power," and one by one, after Remus went and found the family register, every blasted name returned to the tapestry: Alphard, who had left gold to Sirius; Isla, who had married a Muggle; Marius, a Squib; and Cedrella, who married Septimus Weasley. Then Draco followed Remus's instructions, and carefully tested the quill at adding another name.

"Ted Tonks," he said aloud, writing out *Edward Jason Tonks* and then the birth year. He almost wrote out the death year, 1998, before remembering it was 1996. *This uncle of mine died in the war*, he thought, a person he had never given a second thought. *Is that someone else I have to save? That I* can *save? Or am I just going to end up, if I survive, writing in the deathdate, given time*?

Sirius and Remus were crowing in excitement, as Mr. Tonks appeared on the tapestry identical to all of the names that had been there before, Draco's handwriting becoming the standard font for the tree, with the same sizing and blocking and arching branches of the tree joining him and his wife. "Go on," Sirius urged, like this was the best thing he had ever seen, and Draco consulted their notes, before drawing down a line from the couple's and adding their daughter.

"Nymphadora Tonks," he said with a smile. "I learned Lacarnum inflamari, from watching you shoot fireballs at me. And I taught it to Harry..." She appeared, and he knew not to put in 1998 as her year of death this time, but it sat on him like a new guilt of omission, the things he knew and could not say. Except he had tried to tell Severus that he would die, that both the men beside him would die, and they hadn't listened, because he couldn't tell them how he knew.

He didn't know if he could rewrite the future. Maybe he couldn't, or maybe he could. But he could rewrite this tapestry.

"Remus John Lupin," Draco said, drawing a line beside Sirius and writing it carefully, then writing Remus's birthdate. Remus and Sirius cheered like he had just caught the Snitch, as Remus was integrated into the tapestry the same as the others. "Guess it accepted us linking two men as married after all, huh?" he said brightly, and turned to find them kissing. Remus pulled away embarrassed, and Sirius went and hugged him from behind, resting his chin on his shoulder.

"Look," Sirius said. "There you are, Moony. My husband."

He started when Draco added a line from between them with the word *adopted* beside it, and began to write *Harry James Potter.* "We haven't adopted him yet," Sirius sighed.

"I'm putting him on now anyway," Draco said. Sirius looked beseechingly at Remus, who seemed to think for a moment, before nodding.

"Alright, there we go," Draco said, finishing Harry's name before putting the quill back in the box. Sirius took it, but Remus held up a hand to keep Draco in place.

"We're not done yet," Remus said, and Draco stared at his parents' names, tracing them.

"Right," he said, with a lump in his throat. "Uncle Sirius, you could, but I guess *I* should..."

"That's up to you, Draco," Remus said, "Who you want to have blast your parents from the tapestry. But we have a name to change. Yours."

They followed Remus's procedure. Remus had found they couldn't revise the name, but they could blast it away and add it anew. So Draco took up the task to blast all three Malfoys off the tapestry. He steeled himself and went to work.

To Lucius Abraxas Malfoy:

"You never showed me mercy. Confringo Filicida."

To Narcissa Black Malfoy:

"You never protected me from him. Confringo Filicida."

"And you..."

He stared at *Draco Lucius Malfoy* like a mirror.

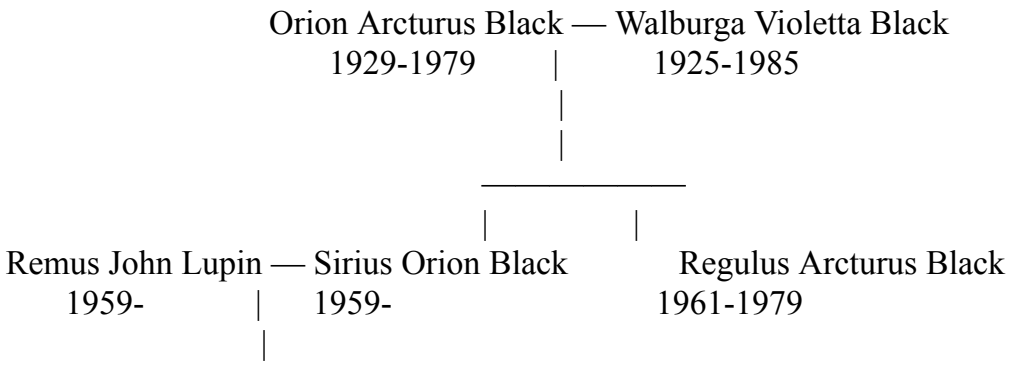
"That's not your name. Confringo Filicida!"

And so his name as well was blasted from the tapestry.

"Here, I'll fix it," Sirius offered, and Remus cut his palm for him, with an apologetic kiss to the back of his hurt hand. He healed it for him once he'd used the blood, with another kiss.

Draco stepped back and let Sirius write. When he was finished, Draco was back on the tapestry, in a different place.

"There," Sirius said. "See that, Frankenstein? That's where you belong."



(adopted) | (adopted)
_____

| |
Draco Lupin Black Harry James Potter
1980- 1980-

Chapter End Notes

And there it is! Wow, fifth year done! It's been wild! I'm so proud it's done :) I've enjoyed all your thoughts and comments so much, they really mean the world to me ^^ I hope that everyone is enjoying the start of the holiday season, for those to whom that applies, and excited for the holidays and winter!

I'll be posting the start of the sixth book the day after tomorrow! I hope you've all enjoyed this book, and please look forward to Draco Black and the Prisoner of Nurmengard!

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